

The Moon Also Rises

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Characters:

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The Moon Also Rises

by [bajablast_BITCH](#)

Summary

It's the end of the world. Kaguya's forces are on his heels, and everyone Sasuke has ever known is dead. But he has a chance to change it all. A chance to go back in time, protect the people he loves, and possibly save the world in the process.

So he's going back. And everyone who *ever* hurt him, or anyone that he cares about, is going to die.

OR: the one where Sasuke goes back in time, and all hell breaks loose

Notes

Well, hello there! I've been reading a lot of time-travel fics, and it's fun to read them. But I couldn't find any Sasuke ones that I really vibed with, so... I decided to write one. It's heavily inspired by some of the brilliant works we have already in the "time-travel Naruto fics" genre; classics like "reverse", "backslide", "Parallel", etc.

It's probably going to be self-indulgent, tropey, heartwarmingly-fluffy, and messy as hell. Let's get to it!

This will be my third WIP, so the updates may not be as fast as they usually are.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The Darkest of All Nights

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's over.

Back pressed against the rough bark of a tree trunk and knees drawn up to his chest, he stares listlessly into the raging forest fire that burns around him. Sasuke knows the inferno is a beacon, broadcasting his location to Kaguya's forces.

But he doesn't really care anymore.

After all, he's the one who lit this fire. He's sick of running. Sick of hiding. He *wants* Kaguya to come to him. He *wants* to face down the horde of White Zetsu, to fight until the last breath leaves his body.

Sasuke wants to die.

He lifts his hands up, examining them. The flickering orange light of the fire illuminates the splotches of dried, flaking blood. The air's filled with the crackle of burning trees, the roar of flames, and the bitter, choking taste of smoke. Sasuke can't breathe, there's a lump growing in his throat, and he *can't breathe--*

Now he's thinking about Naruto. Because it's *Naruto's* blood that covers his hands, stains his clothes, and crusts in his hair. He's trying to remember Naruto's laugh, but all he can hear is Naruto's cry as Kaguya impales him. He's trying to remember twinkling, sky-blue eyes, but all he can see is the hollow, lifeless look in Naruto's dead gaze.

There's a small part of him that still has some sense of self-preservation left. Before, it had urged him to never give up, to keep fighting. And now--

Now it's *screaming* at him, begging him to put out the flames and flee. He ignores it. To hide would just be to prolong the inevitable, and there's no point to it. Because it's over.

Sasuke knows the truth now. He knows that hope is nothing more than a dangerous delusion. There's no room for *hope* in this world. The day Madara cast the Infinite Tsukuyomi, the day that they failed to

kill Kaguya, was the day hope had died.

In the five years since that day, Sasuke watched the world burn. He watched as millions of people were turned into White Zetsu. He watched everyone he cared about die, one by one. He watched the world end.

And it's his fault.

Even with the power of the Sage of the Six Paths, even with the Rinnegan, he hadn't been able to beat Kaguya. That reality had been hard--still *is*--hard to grasp. To look around and realize that he's *still* not strong enough. Too weak to save his parents, too weak to save Itachi, too weak to stop the apocalypse--Sasuke has never been *enough*.

He's never been fucking enough.

This is the part where Naruto would wrap his strong arms around him. Where he'd hold him close and nuzzle his neck. This is the part where Naruto would kiss him on the cheek and whisper that everything was going to be okay. But that's not going to happen this time, and it's not going to be okay. Nothing's *ever* going to be okay, ever again.

Because a few hours ago, Naruto bled out in his arms.

How can anything be okay after that?

How can he keep lying to himself now?

How can Sasuke keep living, keep *going*, after this? A broken croak slips past his lips as he fists his hands in hair and *screams*.

A kaleidoscope of memories flash through his mind. He sees summer nights spent with his hands tangled in Naruto's hair, and bitter winter days with his cold fingers intertwined with Naruto's warm ones. There's balmy happiness, and chilling grief; crushing, numbing despair and the greatest, purest love he's ever known. Because--

Because Sasuke had *loved* Naruto. He had loved him since before he even knew what the word meant. Never had he been able to take his eyes off the other boy, and the feeling had always been mutual. Their worlds had always revolved around each other. And losing that--

Sasuke's strong. He's always been strong. But losing *this*, losing this last thing--

He doesn't just break. He *shatters*, sobbing on the forest floor. Hot tears trace lines down his soot-stained cheeks, and a warm, dry breeze ruffles his hair. He's crying for his parents, for Itachi, for Sakura and Kakashi and so many others. He's crying for Naruto.

And he *shouldn't* be crying. Sasuke knows he's being ungrateful. Plenty of people had been ripped away from their loved ones far too soon. At least he had spent a couple of years with Naruto before the end. But--

It just wasn't enough. No amount of time is enough, no amount of time spent with Naruto could have prepared him for *this*. It just wasn't enough time.

And it could have been so much more. If he hadn't--if he hadn't fled Konoha. If Sasuke had listened to Naruto that day in the Valley of the End, back when they were boys. If he'd just *listened* and stayed--

But he didn't, and he hadn't. Instead, he'd spent years running from the one person who had never abandoned him. He's wasted *so much time*, and he wishes he could go back.

He wishes he could go back.

Sasuke lets his hand drop to his sides, thinking. Normally he'd dismiss this as wishful thinking, as a fanciful fantasy, as a waste of time. But maybe this *isn't* a fantasy. Maybe he doesn't have to dismiss this out of hand.

Because Sasuke has the Rinnegan. The fabled eye of legend, bestowing upon its bearer the power of a god. It's saved Sasuke more times than he can count. It's been five years, and he's still scratching the surface of what he can do with it.

He knows he can manipulate *space* with the Rinnegan. What if he could do the same with *time*? He can exchange the positions of objects in space, but if he could exchange the positions of things in time...

He could go back.

An exchange, then. He needs to bring something forward in time, so he can go back. Sasuke stands slowly, his knees weak, and lets out a breath. Alright. He can figure that out. He stumbles through the burning woods, coughing and squinting as clouds of smoke swirl around him.

He finds what he's looking for after a couple minutes, near the edge of

the fire. It's an ancient tree, relatively untouched by the inferno. It only takes a second to extinguish the flames around him, and kneels on the ground in front of the tree.

Maybe if he brings the younger version of this tree forward in time, he'll be able to send himself back. There's no telling *how* far back he'd get sent, and there's also no telling how much chakra doing this would entail. He doesn't know if it'll even work, or if he has the chakra reserves left to pull it off.

If Naruto were here, he'd probably punch Sasuke in the arm and tell him to stop being stupid. When Sasuke closes his eyes, he can hear Naruto's breathless chuckle and see his easy smile.

I'm supposed to be the reckless one, bastard.

Naruto's not here to pull him back from the edge this time.

Nothing can pull Sasuke back now.

In the back of his mind, he can sense the approaching, diffuse chakra signatures of White Zetsu closing in on him. It's now or never. Sasuke opens his eyes, and presses one trembling hand to the coarse, rough bark of the tree.

There's no room for fear, no room for doubt, no room for grief. Sasuke lets out the breath he's holding, and he casts his jutsu. The air grows cold, and he feels the cool tingle of chakra rushing through his body. Fatigue begins to set in, his energy rapidly being consumed by the voracious demands of the jutsu. His limbs shake with exhaustion.

There's a crack, and the tree in front of him is shrinking. No, not shrinking; it's growing *younger*. It's being replaced with its younger version, he realizes. Sasuke's excitement is cut short by the sudden pull he feels in his chest, and then he's flying forward into a black void. As his consciousness fades, he realizes he has no idea what time period he's sending himself to.

He was never particularly good with those little details, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

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Hopeless

Chapter Notes

I had a couple notes about the fic that I wanted to go over quickly-

Firstly, apparently I didn't tag this as "canon-divergent"?? fdsflhsjksfdks I did now, I'm sorry about that. Secondly, Sasuke was on the run from Kaguya for about five years following the end of the Fourth Shinobi War, which puts his age at around 21-22. Also, this isn't really meant to be a sad or angsty fic, but there is going to be some grief and angst, especially at the start. I'm just warning you beforehand, Sasuke does go through it. It'll get better, and he will get better, but that's about all I can promise you.

It took me about 4 or 5 tries to get the tone that I wanted in this chapter. I really hope it works, because this bitch is TIRED of rewriting this scene over and over.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sasuke wakes up with a strangled cry, gasping for breath. For one brief, terrifying instant, he's on that shattered battlefield. He's watching Kaguya murder Sakura and Kakashi. He's watching their blood pool in the dirt. Then the gentle tap of rain dripping through the holes in the roof brings him back to reality.

It's been two years since that day. The dreams still come, but he remembers where he is now. They're on the run from the ruthless goddess, hiding out in a cluster of ruined homes in the Land of Hot Springs. It's fine. He's safe, even if he is shaking uncontrollably.

The old door, hanging off its hinges, swings open with a creak, and a familiar figure is silhouetted in the doorway.

"Hey," Naruto whispers. His eyes are lidded with sleep, but Sasuke can hear the concern in his voice. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," Sasuke replies automatically, impersonally. "I'm fine."

"You don't seem fine," Naruto says. He's stepping further into the room, stepping over debris. He pauses a couple feet away, yawning.

"It's okay. Just... nightmares," Sasuke says. He makes the mistake of meeting Naruto's gaze, and now he's staring into endless blue eyes, being drawn into their depths.

"I get 'em too," Naruto says, running a hand through his hair. "You shouldn't be alone right now, you know. It doesn't help."

"I told you, I'm fine," Sasuke snaps, and the lie rolls off his tongue more easily this time. Naruto keeps staring at him, as if he can see right through him, and Sasuke looks away hastily.

"Alright," the other boy says softly. He's turning, footsteps creaking towards the door, and some hidden compulsion rises in Sasuke's chest.

"Wait," he says to Naruto, scrambling to his feet. He's still half-asleep, movements clumsy as he stumbles to Naruto.

"I'm sorry. Can you stay?" he whispers, eyes warily coming up to meet Naruto's gaze. And then he nearly falls over backwards, because Naruto's arms are suddenly wrapped around him, and Naruto's face is pressed into his chest.

Naruto's warm. He's impossibly warm, and he lets out a deep, rumbling laugh that Sasuke can feel in his bones.

"Course I can stay. I'll always be here," he says, and Sasuke believes him. They're a matched set, after all. Two parts of the same whole. Naruto's the sun, and Sasuke's the moon. That's how it's always been, and that's how it'll always be.

Sasuke's made his share of mistakes before. He's spent years running from people who only ever cared about him. He's hurt people who would never hurt him. He's nearly lost himself chasing revenge. But none of that matters now, because Naruto is here, and he's never going to leave.

Never.

When Sasuke's eyes slide open, he sees the moon. It's not the blood-red moon of the Infinite Tsukuyomi. It's a silver-white full moon, and Sasuke hasn't seen a more beautiful sight in years. Just for a second, a fleeting moment, he's awash in wonder, because *it worked*.

Then he looks down at the blood crusted all over his arms, black in the dim moonlight, and the weight of the world crashes onto him.

Sasuke's in the woods, oblivious to his surroundings, because he just remembered that Naruto's dead.

And Naruto's not just dead. He was *murdered*, butchered before Sasuke's eyes. Brutally slaughtered, and tossed aside like he was garbage. Like he meant nothing. Like he was worthless.

But he *did* mean something. He meant the world to Sasuke, and Sasuke can't stop replaying the whole scene in his head.

He sees Kaguya's bone-spears rip through Naruto's stomach and chest, the bleached yellow-white bones festooned with streamers of scarlet. He hears the wet crunch and an agonized, choked scream. He watches Kaguya toss the body aside and turn to face the other survivors.

In the midst of battle, Sasuke cradles Naruto's head until the light leaves his eyes.

Then he's gone, he's running through the woods, panicking and stumbling. His clothes are warm with blood, so much blood, gods, *there's so much blood--*

Sasuke is no fool. He knows what Kaguya does to corpses. He knows how she reanimates them, turning them into infernal puppets. Sasuke pictures Naruto's body reanimated, turned into a shambling wreck.

He imagines sky-blue, warm eyes turning into pale, lifeless imitations. He imagines strong arms and tanned skin atrophying and fading into shades of light gray. There's no justice, no dignity left, because Naruto has *surely* been transformed into a senseless abomination, and Sasuke feels his stomach turn as he bends over.

And he retches violently. He hasn't eaten anything, his stomach is empty, but he's still heaving and gasping. Because he feels *sick*. He realizes that he has to get rid of the blood, because he can't *bear* seeing it, he has to get it *off--*

He's crawling frantically towards the sound of water. There's a stream, clear and cold ice-melt rushing over smooth stones. Sasuke thrusts his hands into the water and tries to wash them clean. Some of the flakes of crusted blood are stubborn, so he rakes his nails up and down his forearm to dislodge them, leaving vivid red marks against his pale skin.

So Sasuke's in the woods, oblivious to his surroundings, because he's scrubbing his skin raw.

And the blood won't come off. It won't *fucking* come off, and it's not just on his arms, it's all over his clothes, too. He's ripping off his shirt and hurling it away, ignoring the cold bite of the midnight breeze that ghosts over his skin.

Now his arms are aching from the cold air and frigid water, and burning where he's nearly clawed the skin off, but he feels glad. If he squints and ignores the dark stains all over his pants, he can pretend as though he was never soaked with Naruto's blood.

Sasuke stands, his knees weak and shaky, and almost immediately falls down. He scrapes his elbow, and it feels *good*. So he crawls over to the nearest tree and rams his fist into the chilled, rough bark.

Pain lances through his knuckles, and his skin is split and torn. But he relishes it. Because the physical pain is an excellent distraction from the thoughts echoing in the dark cavern of his head.

He's never going to wrap Naruto in his arms again. He's never going to feel messy blond hair tickling his jaw, never going to feel warm fingers intertwined with his own.

He punches the tree again.

Sasuke's never going to hear Naruto's laugh again. He's never going to lose himself in deep blue, mesmerizing eyes. Never going to see that blinding smile again.

He punches the tree a third time, ignoring the blood smeared on the tree trunk.

And it's not working, the pain isn't a distraction anymore, because now he's realizing he's never going to kiss Naruto again. He's never going to feel Naruto's body pressed up against his. It's all gone.

His Naruto is *gone*.

And Sasuke's in the woods, oblivious to his surroundings, because nothing really matters anymore.

Chapter End Notes

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The Sage in the Woods

Chapter Notes

the idea for this chapter came to me while i was in the shower. Honestly, all my ideas come from long showers. My brain does not seem to function outside of the shower.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Hello? Are you alright?”

It’s a man’s voice, piercing through the foggy numbness in Sasuke’s head and rousing him up. He groans, eyes still closed. His hand is throbbing, his forearms are stinging, and he’s fucking *freezing*. Sasuke cracks his right eye open, blearily looking for the source of the voice.

And he’s immediately glad that he didn’t open his Rinnegan, because there’s a *very* familiar face staring down at him with concern. He never really met this man, but he’s heard about him plenty from Naruto. Long white hair, vertical red-line marks under his eyes, and a wide smile--

Jiraiya frowns, and pokes him.

“Did you hear me? Are you alright?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” Sasuke replies shortly, getting to his feet. His mind is spinning, because if Jiraiya’s alive, that means the Akatsuki haven’t even attacked Konoha yet. Sasuke didn’t really plan to send himself back in time in the first place--it had been a reckless impulse, driven by grief--and he certainly didn’t anticipate being sent back *this far*.

“You look like you got mugged by a pack of squirrels,” Jiraiya says, his eyes roaming over the scratches on Sasuke’s bare arms and the leaves tangled in his hair. “Why aren’t you wearing a shirt?”

“Huh?” Sasuke says, shivering. He’s looking around, and he can’t find his damn shirt. “Shit. I must have lost it.”

“The squirrels must have taken it,” Jiraiya says, stroking his chin thoughtfully. He pulls out a little notebook and a pen, scribbling something down.

“I--there are no squirrels. What are you doing?” Sasuke snaps, crossing

his arms.

"I'm a writer," the white-haired man replies airily. "Your plight is giving me inspiration. A scrawny man, beset by rabid squirrels, rescued--"

"There are no fucking squirrels! And you're not rescuing me!" Sasuke snarls. Jiraiya shrugs, putting away his notebook and pulling out a shirt from the bag slung over his shoulder.

"Here," Jiraiya says, tossing him the shirt. "Don't want you to freeze."

Sasuke opens his mouth to argue, but settles for shaking his head and grudgingly slipping the shirt on. It's too big, but it's better than walking around half-naked.

"Thanks," he mutters. Jiraiya grins at him, and then leans closer.

"Is there something in your eye?" he asks Sasuke, pointing at his closed right eye. Sasuke claps a hand over it, instinctively.

"It's fine. Just got hurt," he replies tersely. The other man nods, as if that makes perfect sense.

"Of course, the squirrels," Jiraiya says, pulling out his notebook, and Sasuke can *feel* his blood pressure rising. He turns around and walks away stiffly, his legs still sore from sleeping in a weird position.

"Wait! Wait," Jiraiya cries out, running after him. He pulls out a scrap of cloth and hands it to Sasuke, who takes it suspiciously. "At least bind that nasty scrape on your hand!"

Sasuke looks down at his right hand and winces. Yeah, punching that tree wasn't his smartest idea. Jiraiya's smile seems to grow even wider as Sasuke wraps the cloth around his hand.

"Right," Sasuke says, turning away and walking faster. He needs space to think. If Jiraiya's alive, then he's sent himself back in time at least six years. Probably more; Naruto spent three years training with the Toad Sage, and Jiraiya is alone right now. Something begins to melt the numbness in Sasuke's head. If he's this far back in time, he might be able to stop the Akatsuki from gathering the tailed beasts in the first place. He could--

There's the sound of a branch breaking, and he whirls around to find Jiraiya right behind him.

“What?” Sasuke growls.

“Hmm? Oh, don’t mind me,” Jiraiya replies easily. “I’m just observing.”

“Observing? Me?”

“Yes. You’re a very interesting character,” Jiraiya explains. His eyes have a far-away look in them, as if the man is pondering something. “I can *feel* the inspiration for my new book coming.”

“Go away,” Sasuke says, putting as much hostility as he can into those two words.

“What? I give you a shirt, and a bandage, and this is how you repay me?” Jiraiya exclaims, one hand pressed to his chest. “You wound me! At least let me accompany you.”

“Absolutely not,” Sasuke says, pinning the other man with his most venomous glare. It doesn’t faze Jiraiya in the *slightest*, because he just keeps following Sasuke.

“Alright. I’m not following you. We’re just headed in the same direction,” Jiraiya says cheerfully. Sasuke rolls his eyes and turns around to face him.

“You’re clearly following me,” he says.

“No!” Jiraiya exclaims. “Where are you headed, anyway?”

Sasuke ponders that for a second, his annoyance slipping away. He’s not really sure.

“Where are we right now?” he asks Jiraiya.

“We’re in the Land of Fire. ‘Bout three days north of Konoha,” comes the cheery reply, and Sasuke’s breath catches in his throat. *Konoha*. It still exists; the people there are still alive.

“I’m going to Konoha,” he says quietly, his mind made up. He can mess with the Akatsuki later, but first he’s going to see the Leaf Village.

“What a coincidence! That’s where I’m headed too. I guess I’ll keep you company,” Jiraiya says, and that dopey grin is back on the man’s face.

“You’re clearly just saying that because I said that’s where I’m going,” Sasuke says, exasperated.

“What! You barely know me, and you’re already accusing me of lying?”

“Yes.”

“Who hurt you so badly that you can’t trust anymore?” Jiraiya says, an expression of shock and hurt on his face. Resisting the urge to shake the other man bodily, Sasuke takes a deep breath and starts walking south.

He can hear Jiraiya following him, scribbling furiously in that stupid *fucking* notebook, and he sighs.

Chapter End Notes

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Direction

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

People assume Jiraiya is an idiot.

He doesn't mind that, though. He leans into it, most of the time. Idiots tend to be underestimated and ignored, and being underestimated and ignored is generally a good thing for spies. That's what he is, of course. Konoha's best spymaster.

And Jiraiya had found something. He'd stumbled onto something *big--*

Deidara of Iwagakure. Sasori of the Red Sand. Kisame Hoshigaki. These are names that live in infamy, names that herald dread and ruin. They're monsters, rogues, and traitors of the most villainous sort, S-ranked criminals. And they'd all *vanished*.

Until now. Because there's a name floating around, hushed whispers in dark alleys and smoky pubs.

Akatsuki.

So Jiraiya had gone to investigate. He'd trekked north, through the lush meadows and forests of Fire Country, seeking answers. Because he needs to know. He *needs* to know if Orochimaru is involved in this.

Orochimaru--just the name of the man who'd once been like Jiraiya's brother spells out pain. A half-dozen emotions flash through Jiraiya's mind. Anger. Shock. Regret. *Longing*.

But all of Jiraiya's plans had gone straight to shit when a stranger fell from the sky.

His eyes land on the black-haired man, watching as he darts through the trees gracefully. Somehow, the stranger's suppressing his chakra now. But there'd been a moment when he'd first woken up where Jiraiya had felt his presence.

And he'd thought, *what the fuck?*

Because he'd never felt such dark, reckless power. Just being near the man had been enough to make Jiraiya's skin tingle and nettle. It's

intoxicating, it's overpowering, it's--

It's dangerous. This man is *dangerous*.

He'll get around to the mystery of the Akatsuki and Orochimaru. He will! There's just... There's a fascinating enigma right in front of him, and Jiraiya can't resist it. There's something about this man that bears watching.

Jiraiya's going to figure it out.

"So, what's your name?" Jiraiya asks from behind him. Sasuke ignores him. He's been running through the trees as fast as he can, but he's still drained from his time-travel experiment. Jiraiya's been able to keep up easily, hopping from tree to tree and bombarding him with questions.

None of which Sasuke answers.

Sasuke's wearing a makeshift eye-patch over his Rinnegan now, made from a strip ripped from the hem of the borrowed shirt he's wearing, and it's *itchy*. Navigating with one eye, when he's dead-tired already, has also proven to be quite the experience. He's nearly slammed into a tree trunk multiple times.

"If you won't tell me your name, I'll have to use a placeholder in the novel," the other man calls from behind him. "Maybe Squirrel-Man?"

Sasuke wonders what he ever did to deserve this.

"Where are you even going? Konoha is three days away, and you don't have any food or water," Jiraiya remarks. Sasuke comes to a stop near a tree as frowns, because that's a good point.

"Do you have food?" he asks Jiraiya, and he gets a smirk in reply.

"Of course. But why would I share with you? You've been nothing but rude to me," he replies, sniffing. Sasuke takes a deep, calming breath, and then slowly lets it out.

"I'll let you ask me questions if you give me some clothes, food, and water. And maybe some money, too," Sasuke adds, as an afterthought.

"Like an interview?" Jiraiya says with a big grin, and Sasuke sighs.

“Yes. An interview. Whatever,” he grumbles, starting to run again.

“What’s your name?” Jiraiya asks again as he follows, and Sasuke rolls his eyes at the other man’s stubborn persistence. He doesn’t want to advertise the fact that there’s an Uchiha running around--his family tends to attract *all* the wrong kinds of attention.

“Juugo,” he says, after a short pause. “I’m Juugo.”

“Alright, Juugo. I’m Jiraiya. Where are you from?”

“Fire Country,” Sasuke replies curtly.

“What happened to your eye? What’s with the eyepatch?” the other man asks him.

“I was attacked by squirrels, remember?”

“How did you end up in the woods with no shirt, money, or food?” Jiraiya says, and even though he can’t see the man’s face, Sasuke knows he’s being laughed at.

“Bad planning,” Sasuke says, and that answer isn’t even a lie. “Who’s the Hokage?”

“Shouldn’t you know that?” Jiraiya says, voice laced with confusion. “Since you’re from the Land of Fire?”

“I’ve been... travelling for a while. Can you just tell me?”

“The Third Hokage reclaimed his position after the nine-tails attack,” Jiraiya says, and Sasuke can hear a hint of sadness under the cheerful facade. Sasuke’s probably acting suspiciously right now, asking strange questions, but he needs to know more.

“How long ago was that?”

“Five years,” Jiraiya says. Sasuke stops moving, suddenly, and Jiraiya nearly crashes into him. Five years after the nine-tails attack... which means--

His family is still alive. The Uchiha massacre hasn’t happened. There’s another Sasuke running around, a little five-year-old boy. Danzo is alive, and so is Itachi and Shisui and his parents and *Naruto*--

He could save them.

He could save them all. It would only take one action on his part.

Sasuke didn't really have a plan when he launched himself back in time. In the hours since then, he's considered chasing down the Akatsuki, and he *will* get around to that. But right now, he has a chance to avert disaster. All he has to do is find Danzo and gut him like a fish, and that's something he's *more* than happy to do.

For a second, he wonders if it's smart to change the past so cavalierly. He doesn't know what repercussions killing Danzo will have. But as he resumes running, Sasuke finds that he doesn't really give a fuck.

After all, if there's one thing he's always been good at, it's getting revenge.

Chapter End Notes

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At Your Expense

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They're walking through the woods, and Sasuke's yawning. He's yawning because *someone's* snoring kept waking him up. Rubbing his eyes blearily, Sasuke shoots a baleful glare at Jiraiya. The other man gives him a wide-eyed look.

"What did I do now? I haven't even said anything!" Jiraiya says.

"You snore," Sasuke says, his voice quiet and menacing, "so *fucking* loudly."

"Hmm," Jiraiya says thoughtfully. He whips out his notebook, muttering as he writes. "Irritable in the mornings."

"I-I'm not *irritable*," Sasuke growls, and he musters the best one-eyed glare he can manage. "I just like sleeping--what are you writing? Stop it!"

"It's part of the interview. If I'm going to write about you, I need to know all your weird quirks," Jiraiya explains patiently.

"Weir--no. Nevermind," Sasuke sighs, walking faster and doing his best to keep his cool. Somehow, he doubts Naruto would approve of him throttling Jiraiya. The trees suddenly thin out, and now they're standing on a dusty road.

"Do you know where this road goes?" Sasuke says, peering up and down the deserted track. Jiraiya nods vigorously, grinning.

"If we keep going south, we'll reach this wonderful little town," he says, enthused. "There's an *excellent* brothel there, actually, if we have time--"

"We don't have time," Sasuke says flatly. "Here, give me your wallet for a second."

"My wallet? Why?" Jiraiya squawks, his hand flying to where the frog-shaped purse is clipped to his belt. Sasuke snaps his fingers impatiently, rolling his eyes.

“You said you would pay me for the interview, remember? I need new clothes.”

“What’s wrong with your clothes right now?” Jiraiya demands. Sasuke raises an eyebrow.

“I look like I robbed the evidence locker of a police station,” he says testily, gesturing to his blood-stained pants and too-large shirt.

“Well, *I* think it looks cool. Makes you look dangerous, and shit,” Jiraiya says.

“Stop thinking. You’ll hurt yourself.”

“You’re so *mean*! After I *rescued* you from the squirrels--”

“Jiraiya! Give me the damn wallet!” Sasuke yells.

The other man sullenly hands it over, pouting.

He ends up splurging on clothes. It’s not because spending Jiraiya’s money is a way for Sasuke to punish him for being so *fucking* annoying. Nope. Not at all. Sasuke would *never* do anything like that. Sasuke *certainly* isn’t hiding a smile everytime Jiraiya sputters at the price of something. That would be petty, and he’s not petty.

“Which one of these masks do you like better?” he asks Jiraiya, having found the two most expensive ones that he could in the clothing store. He gets a groan in reply.

“Why do you need a mask?” Jiraiya complains. He’s been alternating between frowning, and shooting mournful looks at the wallet Sasuke’s holding.

“If you won’t pick one, I’ll just have to get both...” he threatens. Jiraiya immediately points to the cheapest of the two, a simple black mask with two narrow eye slits, and Sasuke can’t help but smirk.

Chapter End Notes

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Memories

Chapter Notes

do you ever get an idea, and it just lives in your head until you write it down? that's me, with this fic... i can't focus on anything else lmao

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There are good days, days when they can forget about the war. These are the days Sasuke loves best. These are the days that he can pretend that Kaguya doesn't exist, that the White Zetsu aren't searching for them. He imagines this is how life would have been like, had they defeated Kaguya; wandering through the world with Naruto at his side, enjoying the pleasant heat of summer and the sound of Naruto's laugh. These are the good days.

But there are also bad days.

They'd found a band of survivors on the very edge of Fire Country, besieged by a force of over a hundred White Zetsu. A pitched battle raged as they rescued the survivors, Sasuke and Naruto serving as the rearguard to hold off Kaguya's forces.

That's when they saw him.

Kakashi's body had been mangled, torn, abused, but there was no mistaking the scraps of silver hair that clung to his reanimated body. Naruto had frozen, unable to move, as the corpse of their one-time teacher shambled towards them.

Sasuke had dragged Naruto with him as they fled. There had been no physical injuries, but Sasuke couldn't help but wince at the empty, despairing look in Naruto's usually warm eyes.

They'd made their camp in an abandoned farmstead. Some of the survivors choose to keep watch, while others lay under the stars and dress their wounds in the warm summer air. Now Sasuke sits with his back pressed up against the shed that Naruto's sleeping in.

He can hear Naruto crying.

Sasuke knows what Kakashi meant to Naruto. He saw how the man's death broke the blond. And to fight against Kakashi again, after he's been defiled by Kaguya--

It's horrible. It's cruel.

And Sasuke's not one to offer comfort. He's a damaged, emotionally stunted asshole who has no business trying to talk about feelings. But he's getting up, pushing the door of the shed open, and staring at Naruto's back as it heaves with poorly-concealed sobs.

"Naruto," he says. He doesn't get a response, so he tries again. "Naruto? C'mon. Look at me."

Naruto's eyes are red-rimmed and puffy, and he's sniffing. Sasuke just stares for a moment, unsure of what to do. Black eyes gaze into blue ones for a long moment, before Sasuke clears his throat nervously and talks.

"I knew this guy once, a total idiot, and he told me that being alone doesn't help," he says, and Naruto's lips raise in the faintest smile.

"I don't know," the blond says, his voice thick with emotion. "He seems like a smart guy."

"He acts like a complete fool most of the time," Sasuke says, smirking as he pokes Naruto in the shoulder. "But I love him anyway."

There's dazed silence as Naruto slowly sits up, staring at him. His eyes widen with surprise, and his jaw slackens with disbelief. His tears are forgotten entirely as he gapes at Sasuke.

"You... love me?" he asks Sasuke in a small voice.

And Sasuke hadn't really meant to blurt it out like that, hadn't really intended for Naruto to ever find out about this particular secret. But now that the cat's out of the proverbial bag, he nods slowly.

"More than anything else," he says, and then Naruto's hand grabs his collar and drags him close. When Naruto's lips press against his own, he feels an elated electric tingle flicker through his whole body. Naruto tastes like smoke and sweat and salty tears, and it's the best combination Sasuke has ever experienced, because it's Naruto that he's kissing.

Sasuke pulls away a little, a stupid grin on his face. Naruto takes one look at him and starts chuckling, his breath tingling as it blows over Sasuke's jaw. And maybe the world's ending, maybe all hope is lost, maybe Kaguya is going to win after all. But in this shed, it's just the two of them; Naruto and Sasuke, laughing as they hold each other. This is their whole world.

Moonlight floods through the window, ethereal silver light flowing over the two beds in the room. Sasuke's cheeks are damp, eyes stinging, as he sits up. It's the middle of the night, clearly, and he can see the outline of Jiraiya sleeping in the other bed in the room.

They'd chosen a little inn to stay at tonight, to take a little break from sleeping outside. Jiraiya had complained until Sasuke agreed to only get one room. The man had pouted as he shook his much-lightened wallet, until Sasuke had finally relented.

So here he is, laying in a bed that's much softer than what he's used to, the numbness in his heart giving way to pain. Sasuke sits up, resting his face in his hands, taking deep breaths. A part of him had thought that maybe this was all a dream. A part of him had thought that surely this couldn't be reality. Surely *this* could have never happened. Naruto would never leave him--

That part of him is still trying to come to terms with what he's lost.

"Juugo?" comes a sleepy voice. Sasuke's head snaps up as Jiraiya stirs. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Sasuke says hastily, trying to mask the raw *hurt* in his voice. "Go to sleep, old man."

"M not old," Jiraiya grumbles, turning his back to Sasuke and going back to sleep. Sasuke closes his eyes, focusing on his breathing as he runs a hand through his hair. His hair--

"You need a haircut," Naruto giggles, tugging playfully on his hair. Sasuke scowls.

"Quit it," he grumbles. "That hurts!"

Naruto shifts so he's fully sitting in Sasuke's lap, both hands carding through Sasuke's hair. Their faces are inches from each other, and Sasuke's breath catches in his throat as he looks into deep blue eyes--

Sasuke stumbles out of bed, nearly tripping over the sheets that tangle between his legs. His knee clips the bedside table, but he doesn't even feel it. His visions' gone blurry, his breathing is coming in ragged gasps, and his heart feels like it's going to *burst*.

Now Sasuke's in the bathroom, turning on the harsh white light, slamming the door shut behind him and locking it. He's ripping the ratty eye-patch off and flinging it away, staring at his own face in the

mirror. He sees a tired eye, dark circles, sickly-pale skin. He sees locks of silky black hair falling over his face. He sees the wet, glistening tracks of tears.

He can't stop thinking about Naruto's fingers in his hair.

There's a kunai clenched in his shaking fist as he pulls a lock of hair straight. It cuts quickly, easily, black hair falling into the sink and onto the floor. He grabs another fistful of hair.

It's all over the floor now.

His hair is all over the floor, but he still can't stop thinking about *Naruto*, Naruto touching him, Naruto smiling at him, and Sasuke can't--

The kunai slips from his fingers, clattering against the tile. Sasuke steps away from the mirror, screwing his eyes shut and letting his back hit the wall. He slides down, curling into a ball.

His shoulders shake with the force of his sobs. Sasuke wraps his arms around himself and rocks back and forth, his eyes stinging. There's a knock at the door, and Jiraiya's voice comes through faintly.

"Is everything okay in there?"

But nothing's okay. Nothing will be okay again. So Sasuke doesn't get up, doesn't unlock the door, doesn't even reply. He sits there and cries until the tears run dry, until his throat aches, until exhaustion numbs the hurt.

He cries until, eventually, he falls asleep.

The sun shines on his face through the small window above the sink, and Sasuke groans as he wakes up. He's sore from sleeping on the cold tile, and he's uncomfortably itchy from wayward strands of his shorn hair. He sits up, wincing at the pangs from his abused muscles.

And then Sasuke remembers where he is, and what he's lost. His breath leaves him, and there's a dull *ache* in his chest. He wonders when it'll stop hurting so much. Or if it ever will.

He needs to *do* something. He needs a goal, a task, *something*. He'll go crazy otherwise.

So Sasuke slumps back, letting his arms fall to his sides as he stares up at the ceiling and just... thinks. The Akatsuki haven't gathered their full strength yet, and Danzo hasn't orchestrated the Uchiha massacre. Those are the two things he wants to alter. If he changes the course of history enough, Kaguya won't even *have* the chance to awaken.

But it's more than that. Because he's not doing this for *altruistic* purposes. Despite what Naruto would always tell him, he's not a good person. He's not looking to save the world or play hero.

No. He's hurting, and he wants the people responsible to hurt just as much as he does. He wants to destroy them, ruin them, make them regret *everything*.

Naruto never believed in revenge. He believed in *love* and *forgiveness*, always doing the right thing, and offering mercy where he could. That's how he had lived.

And that's how he had died.

But Sasuke doesn't believe in forgiveness. He's not sure he even believes in love, not anymore. The only thing he believes in is burning Danzo, Obito, Madara--all of them--to the ground. That's what *he* believes in.

The bathroom door opens eventually, and Jiraiya looks up as Juugo steps out, adjusting his eye-patch. His hair is short and choppy now, his one visible eye is swollen and red, and the dark circles that mark his face are even more pronounced now.

Juugo looks like shit.

"Are--are you alright?" Jiraiya asks. He just gets an irritated glare in response.

"Yes. Let's head out."

Chapter End Notes

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Team Ro

Chapter Notes

i would be updating faster, but work is actually killing me right now >.> ALSO i aged Shisui and Itachi up a little bit, so they're both around 17 at this point. Did I need to do this? probably not, but since the fic is tagged canon-divergence, might as well go WILD.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Kakashi sighs as he glances at the clock. He looks over to where Tenzo's sitting on one of the lumpy armchairs in Team Ro's ready room.

"They're late," he grumbles. "Again."

"You're one to talk about tardiness," Tenzo replies, raising an eyebrow at him. Kakashi shoots him a sour look, but he can't really argue with *that* point.

"Well, I usually have a good reason for being late," he counters, crossing his arms defensively.

"Getting lost on the path of life' is not a good reason," Tenzo says, chuckling. Kakashi's about to say something back, but then the sound of muted running and stifled laughter drifts from the hallway. The ready room's door flies open, and two dark-haired teenagers burst in.

"Sorry! Fuck, I know we're late, *please* don't eviscerate us, Cap!" Shisui Uchiha says. He leans against the wall, laughing and panting for breath. "It's Itachi's fault."

"It was not." Itachi's normally impassive face is marred by a little frown. "*You're* the one who--"

"Okay! That's enough!" Kakashi says, jumping in. "Shisui, Itachi, just... try to be a little punctual in the future, alright?"

"Well, I mean, I'll *try*--" Shisui starts to say, and then yelps as Itachi punches him in the arm.

"Yes, Captain," Itachi says. "It won't happen again."

Kakashi takes one look at the shit-eating grin on Shisui's face, and knows that Itachi is lying through his damn teeth.

"Right," he says drily. "Well, we have a new mission. It's a high-profile escort to Wind Country. We'll be leaving in a couple days."

"They're assigning a full ANBU team to an *escort* mission?" Tenzo asks. "Who the fuck are we escorting?"

"Our charge is a Konoha council member. Shimura Danzo," Kakashi says, handing out three copies of the mission assignment. Shisui frowns down at the piece of paper.

"Why does he want an ANBU escort? He could just get an escort from his goons," Shisui says, scratching the back of his head.

"Goons?" Kakashi asks.

"He means Root," Itachi says with a sigh.

"Firstly, they probably don't want other countries to know that Root exists. Even allies," Kakashi says. "Secondly, Root members are our comrades, not 'goons'."

"Have you seen them?" Shisui demands, suddenly animated. "They're goons."

"He has a point," Tenzo says thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "Have you ever seen one smile?"

"Whatever," Kakashi says, rolling his eyes. "All the information you need is on the mission assignment sheet I just gave you. If you have any other questions, ask me now. I have to head to Root Headquarters for a debriefing after this, so I won't be free later."

"You mean Goon Headquarters," Shisui corrects him, and Tenzo snickers.

"I'm going to throw you off Hokage Mountain one day," Kakashi grumbles, and even *Itachi* smiles at that.

Chapter End Notes

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Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

These woods are familiar. The setting sun blazes through bright green leaves, and the forest floor is dappled with golden light. There's crickets chirping in a discordant chorus, and birds flitting about. Sasuke hasn't seen anything like it in years. There's so much *life* around him.

"Can I ask you more questions now?" Jiraiya asks from behind him, jolting him back to reality. He groans.

"No. We're taking a little break, remember?" he says, turning to face Jiraiya.

"That was three hours ago."

"And they've been the best three hours of my life."

"Aw, c'mon! You spent *so much* of my money!" Jiraiya whines, crossing his arms. "I've earned at least a couple questions."

"Fine." Sasuke rolls his eyes under his new mask.

"Sweet!" Jiraiya says cheerily. "Why are you headed to Konoha?"

"I... have some family there," Sasuke replies. Jiraiya whips out his notebook and scribbles something down.

"What's with the mask?"

"It's a fashion statement," Sasuke says drily.

"Are you a ninja?" Jiraiya asks him, and Sasuke pauses.

"No," Sasuke says, because he's really not. Not anymore. "Now let me ask you something. Why are you following me?"

"I told you, I'm a writer. You're intriguing," Jiraiya says with a shrug. "I need something interesting for my next novel."

"How did you even find me?"

“That’s two questions,” Jiraiya complains. “But if you must know, I’ve been hiking through the forests of Fire Country the past couple of years. I came upon you by chance.”

“You spend all your time just wandering around? Why?” Sasuke asks, and Jiraiya looks down at the ground.

“Nowhere really feels like home anymore,” he replies softly.

And there it is. It’s a fleeting flash of pain in Jiraiya’s eyes, a momentary hardness in the set of his jaw, but Sasuke recognizes the expression for what it is. It’s a mix of longing and hurt, a combination of regret and grief.

Sasuke knows the stories; Orochimaru defected from Konoha, and Jiraiya had followed him to try and bring him back. It’s not that different from what he had done to Naruto, Sasuke realizes with a pang.

This is what Naruto must have felt for years when he left, and that thought cuts him to the bone.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and for once, Jiraiya is silent as he nods in acknowledgement. They resume jogging down the path like they were doing before, but it’s quiet now. There are no questions or attempts at conversation from Jiraiya. And Sasuke kind of misses it.

It comes into view. The main gate of Konoha is a sight he’d thought he’d never see again. But there it is; tall and proud, light-green doors flung open. There’s crowds of people moving in and out, and a handful of sharp-eyed Konoha ninja in flak jackets standing guard. And through the open gate, Sasuke can see it all.

He sees the urban sprawl of the village, interspersed with many large trees. In the distance rises Hokage Mountain. There’s four faces carved into the rock, visible from even this distance. Nostalgia threatens to swamp him, and he stops walking for a moment.

“It’s really something, isn’t it?” Jiraiya says, grinning. “The largest hidden village in the world. I haven’t been back here in *years*.”

“Me neither,” Sasuke mumbles. He’s spent years on the run, always fighting and hiding and scraping by. There was no concept of ‘home’ in Kaguya’s world. Now he’s standing at the gate of a village where

Itachi, his parents, Naruto--they're all alive. They're all safe and alive, and they're all *here*. And maybe 'home' isn't a concept that he's familiar with anymore, but--

This place feels like it could be home, eventually. All he has to do is save it.

Chapter End Notes

i'm actually like... really humbled that people seemed to like this idea. I thought this would be a fic I would be writing mostly for myself, cause people wouldn't be interested lol

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Into the Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's late afternoon, and the buildings of Konoha are gilded with warm light as the sun descends towards the horizon. There's a pleasant breeze rushing up and down the streets, making the trees lining the boulevards rustle. And the thing that Sasuke finds truly beautiful is the chatter of conversation: the drone of dozens, of hundreds of people talking to each other.

Jiraiya's walking next to him, and the white-haired man has pulled the hood of his heavy traveling cloak over his head to obscure his features.

"Hiding from someone?" Sasuke asks. "Do they hate you here, or something?"

"I just... would prefer that people not see me here," Jiraiya says, casting a wary glance in the direction of the women's bathhouse down the street. Sasuke snorts with amusement as he follows the other man's gaze.

"You're ridiculous," Sasuke says, shaking his head.

"You can't say anything about it," Jiraiya says, crossing his arms stiffly. "You're wearing that ugly mask."

"*Ugly*? I thought it looked kinda good," Sasuke says. He self-consciously pulls the hood of his own cloak up. "Whatever. Shut up, old man."

"I'm not old!"

"You're old, perverted, and you smell terrible."

"Terrible?" Jiraiya gasps. "That's the aroma of sage oil!"

"It's fucking disgusting, that's what it is. You need to find a bathhouse."

"I'm banned from most of them," Jiraiya says with a mournful note in his voice.

“Of course you are,” Sasuke says with a sigh.

“You have no idea where we are, do you?” Itachi asks mildly. Shisui scoffs, flashing him an affronted look.

“I know *exactly* where we are, for your information,” Shisui says. He points to the nearest street sign. “Clearly, we’re on Jasmine Street.”

Itachi groans internally. Shisui had insisted that they visit a new dango shop that had just opened before they left on their next mission. Itachi had foolishly agreed. And now, here they were, lost in the Merchant’s Quarter of Konoha.

“It’s around here somewhere,” Shisui mutters to himself. He grabs Itachi’s hand and *pulls*, yanking Itachi down the street as he wanders off in a new direction. And Itachi can’t help but chuckle softly.

“We’re lost, Shisui,” he says.

“*You* may be lost,” Shisui sniffs, continuing to drag Itachi with him. “I know exactly where we’re headed.”

They turn a street corner, and then there’s a flash of black clothing and jolt of pain as Shisui and Itachi slam into someone. The stranger stumbles back and falls flat on his back.

“Oops,” Shisui says sheepishly, and the smile slips off of Itachi’s face.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers, mortified, as he helps the stranger up. The stranger’s face is covered with a black mask, featureless except for two eye-holes. The man stiffens suddenly as a single dark eye meets Itachi’s gaze.

“It’s not your fault. My companion is rather clumsy,” a voice says. Itachi looks up to see an older man with a hood obscuring his face, and long white hair peeking out from under the cowl.

“I’m not clumsy, and I’m fine,” the masked stranger growls at the older man, yanking his arm out of Itachi’s hands and brushing himself off. He’s looking straight at the ground now, stepping away from Itachi. And that voice--

The stranger’s voice is *familiar*. It’s a voice that Itachi *knows*, but he can’t quite place it. But then Shisui’s grabbing his hand again, and

Itachi's being pulled away.

"Sorry!" Shisui yells over his shoulder at the two strangers. He's ecstatic, pointing at something down the street. "Look! It's right there! Told you we weren't lost!"

When Itachi turns to find the stranger again, he and his companion are nowhere to be seen.

"Are you alright?" Jiraiya says, laughing. "You weren't lying about not being a ninja. The way you fell flat on your ass--"

"Shut up," Sasuke says, grabbing Jiraiya and pulling him into a side alley. His face is hot, and his heart is racing, because he's just seen someone he hasn't seen in *years*. He's known for a couple days that this person is alive and well, but it's another thing to have *Itachi* grab him by the arm and help him up.

He'd frozen as he stared at Itachi's face with one eye. He'd frozen as he took in gentle brown eyes and a concerned frown. He'd frozen as Itachi had mumbled an apology, because the last time he'd heard that voice--

I'm so sorry, Sasuke. This is it.

Just know, whatever you do, I will love you always.

His face is so *hot*, and he's having trouble breathing. Sasuke rips off the mask, fighting back the unshed tears that sting his eyes. His hands are shaking, knuckles pale as he grips the mask *hard*.

"Wait," Jiraiya says, lowering his hood. "What's wrong?"

There's no reply, because Sasuke can barely *breathe*, let alone speak. His knees feel weak, so he pushes his back against the brick wall of the alley and slides down to the ground. For a long moment, he sits there with his head in his hands.

"Juugo?" Jiraiya says, reaching out to touch him. Sasuke's head snaps up at the foreign touch, an iron curtain slamming shut over his face.

"I'm fine," he says, slipping his mask back on. "I just needed a moment."

"Are you sure?" Jiraiya asks doubtfully. "What even happened?"

"I'm tired," Sasuke says smoothly, standing up. He strides out of the alley, and Jiraiya hastens to follow him.

"Are you going to meet with your family?" Jiraiya asks him, and Sasuke grits his teeth.

"No. It's late right now. I can do that later," he says. He glances at Jiraiya out of the corner of his eye. "Do you have any family or friends you're staying with?"

"Just my godson. He's a little menace," Jiraiya says, grinning. Sasuke swallows nervously, not wanting to even *think* about seeing Naruto right now.

"Why don't we just get a room at an inn tonight? You can finish interviewing me, and then we can go our separate ways?" Sasuke suggests. Jiraiya pouts.

"Our separate ways? I thought I was growing on you," he says. Sasuke snorts with amusement.

"As if," he replies. "You'll still see me around in the village."

Jiraiya seems interested in that, tapping his chin thoughtfully with the end of his pen.

"Ok, fine. We can find an inn for the night. Are you paying?" Jiraiya asks hopefully.

"Of course not."

Chapter End Notes

i'm writing two naruto longfics at the same time, and it's kind of hard to get into the headspace for one when you just finished writing an update for the other one >.> why do i do this to myself

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The Mission

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sasuke runs a hand over a broad expanse of tanned skin, drawing a giggle out of Naruto.

“That tickles!” Naruto says, squirming. “Stop it!”

“You sure you want me to stop?” Sasuke says, smirking as his hand slides down Naruto’s chest to regions further south. The other boy’s body stiffens beneath him, drawing a startled breath.

“Okay, okay!” Naruto laughs, “keep going...”

Sasuke runs his lips over Naruto’s jaw, breathing the blond in. It’s heady, intoxicating. His skin sparks wherever he touches Naruto, and his heart’s beating crazy fast. There’s never been anyone else who can slip past his armor. There’s never been anyone else who can match him. There’s never been anyone else who can make him feel this way.

He stares into deep-blue eyes which crinkle in a smile, utterly spellbound. Those damn eyes...

They suck him in. It’s mesmerizing. It’s addictive. He could get lost for hours in those eyes. It’s happened before.

“You alright there, buddy? It’s rude to stare, ya know,” Naruto says, a blinding white smile stretching over his lips.

“You’re incredible,” Sasuke replies softly, letting a hand drift up to tangle fingers into Naruto’s hair. “I’m never letting you go.”

“I’m not going anywhere--” Naruto starts to say, but Sasuke’s already pressing their lips together, cutting him off--

Now Sasuke is crouching in the woods, cold air stinging his face, cradling Naruto’s body in his arms. The slick warmth of blood covers his arms, covers his clothes, and covers Naruto’s chest. He’s bleeding out, and Sasuke knows there’s nothing that he can say, nothing he can do that will make it better.

Nothing will ever get better.

Sasuke's arms tremble and his breath catches in his throat as he meets Naruto's eyes one last time. The other boy's trying to talk, but only a pained rattle leaves his bloody lips. Sasuke stares into rich, blue eyes, seeing them crinkle again as Naruto flashes him a faint, pained smile. It's a meager farewell, a weak send-off.

"I love you," Sasuke gasps, his arms tightening around the blond.

And he stares into those blue eyes until the life fades out of them.

Nothing will ever get better.

Sasuke runs his hand over his face as morning light shines through the window, the sudden brightness making his head throb.

He feels like shit. Jiraiya kept him up late last night, pestering him with "interview questions" for his book. He's fucking exhausted, and he can't sleep. He can't sleep because with sleep come the dreams, and he's sick of dreaming about Naruto.

So he doesn't sleep.

He had packed the clothes and supplies he'd bought with Jiraiya's money into a black bag, and now he hefts the bag as he prepares to leave. Jiraiya's snoring peacefully in the other bed, and Sasuke spares a moment to give him an almost-fond glance. Then he noiselessly slips out the window.

The streets are mostly empty this early, as the rising sun daubing the sky brilliant shades of purple and orange. He lands on the ground lightly, shifting his pack so it rests securely on his back.

Running into Itachi had shaken him up. There's no point lying to himself about that. He's never managed *feelings* particularly well, and his minor breakdown yesterday is proof enough of that. There's another person who's alive right now, but he resolves not to think about them. It hurts too much.

He's not thinking about golden hair and vibrant blue eyes. He's not thinking about tanned skin and a wide, effortless smile. Sasuke sighs.

Okay. So he's thinking about the six-year-old version of Naruto living across town right now. He *needs* to see the boy, but at the same time, he doesn't know if he can handle it. Seeing this younger Naruto would

mean that the older version, the version that Sasuke had known and loved, was gone forever.

Sasuke doesn't want to see him.

No, he does want to see him.

Actually, he really doesn't.

He clenches his fists, remembering the animosity and hostility Naruto had faced growing up, and realizing that the boy is probably experiencing it *daily*. Sasuke tries not to think about it, because he doesn't think he can handle seeing any more loved ones wandering the streets right now. It's like seeing ghosts.

"Fuck this," he says to himself, running a hand through his hair. He needs to think about something else.

So Sasuke thinks about revenge instead. It's an easy distraction. Most of his life has been spent chasing revenge, after all. He's *good* at this. The anger and hate is comfortable. Familiar. He'll start with Danzo, of course. If he kills the man now, there's a good chance the Uchiha massacre will never happen.

It's a chance worth taking.

But Danzo was a paranoid bastard, and Sasuke has no doubt that this is still true of the man's younger version. He *could* storm the Root headquarters, wiping them out to the last man. He has the Rinnegan, the Six Paths chakra, and the Eternal Mangekyou Sharingan. He's pretty sure no one could stop him.

That would be rather messy, though. He doesn't particularly *want* to deal with the complications of assassinating such a high-ranking official in the very heart of Konoha. He'll do it if he has to, but if there's any alternative...

Something catches his eye. A little newsstand sits on the intersection of two boulevards, a man setting up stacks of newspapers as he yawns. It's a mundane scene, not particularly worthy of note, aside from one thing.

Danzo's face is emblazoned on the front page of the newspaper.

Sasuke darts over, snatching up a newspaper and flickering around the corner before anyone can even tell he's there. His eyes fly over the

caption on the photo and the accompanying article, and he laughs out loud.

The universe really *is* on his side this time. Because the news article is discussing a diplomatic summit to negotiate a military alliance between Suna, the Village Hidden in the Sand, and Konoha. The person being sent to represent the Leaf Village is none other than one Shimura Danzo.

And Danzo may have an army of fanatically loyal, brainwashed followers. He may rule over Konoha from his underground stronghold. He may hold more political power in the village than the Hokage himself. But none of that will matter, because the moment he's far away enough from the village, Sasuke is going to *rip him apart*.

He lets his feet wander of their own accord, daydreaming. Danzo's Sharingan-studded arm had been implanted by Orochimaru prior to the Uchiha massacre. While Danzo may not have the ten Sharingan he possessed when Sasuke killed him the first time, he probably still has a couple.

That suits Sasuke *just* fine, because Izanagi will give him the unique pleasure of killing Danzo over and over, in different and creative ways. He smiles darkly at that thought. Then the smile fades as he looks up.

The decrepit apartment building in front of him is painfully familiar. He shakes his head, realizing he'd unconsciously walked straight to Naruto's shitty apartment. That makes sense, though. Sasuke had always run to Naruto. And this may not be *his* Naruto, the man he'd loved with all of his heart, but it's still *Naruto*. It's still home.

Now the distraction offered by revenge isn't working. Now--

He can see the window of Naruto's room, dark and empty right now. The boy's probably asleep. Sasuke scowls as he takes in the seedy surroundings, seething inside. This Naruto is still a rowdy child, but to Sasuke, Naruto is the saviour of the Leaf Village. He's the boy who'd defeated Pain, who had put his life on the line time and time again to save the village he'd loved.

He deserves better than this.

Sasuke wants to take him. He wants to take Naruto away and raise the boy himself, away from all this. Naruto deserves the fucking *world*, and Sasuke wants to give it to him. He entertains the fantasy for a

couple minutes, standing motionless outside the apartment building.

They could live on one of the scattered farmsteads outside the village. Sasuke's an adult now, he could manage to raise a child. This Naruto would never be able to replace the Naruto he'd lost, but that doesn't mean Sasuke doesn't love him. He could spare the child *so much* pain, he could give the boy a loving home. It's a nice fantasy, but--

Sasuke has to change the way the future unfolds. He's already seen this play out before, and he doesn't like the ending. No, he needs to rewrite history to ensure that Kaguya *never* rises, to ensure that the world doesn't end. That means waging a bitter war against a gauntlet of deadly adversaries, and he can't take Naruto with him while he does that. It's not safe, and Sasuke can't bear the thought of losing Naruto a second time.

Sasuke presses the heels of his palms into his eyes, groaning. All he wants to do is slip through the window above him and look upon Naruto one more time. He wants to wrap the boy up in a hug and give him the affection he deserves.

Sasuke would do anything for this boy. He'd walk over broken glass barefoot just to see Naruto smile again. He'd take a knife to the gut just to hear Naruto laugh again. He'd fall from grace just to see Naruto's face one more time.

So he bottles up his longing and his selfish desires, locking them into the far recesses of his mind. He has a job to do first.

He'd been lost when he'd woken up in that forest to find Jiraiya peering down at him. He'd had no direction or purpose when he'd stumbled back home to Konoha. But now he has his mission. Now he has his *purpose*.

He's going to kill Danzo, Obito, Zetsu, all of them. And then he's going to take Naruto from this bitter and dark place and raise the boy himself. This is his mission. This is all he wants now.

"I'll come back for you," he says quietly, staring up at the darkened window of Naruto's tiny apartment. "I swear I'll come back for you."

Sasuke turns around and walks down the street, the newspaper clutched in his clenched hand. He doesn't look back.

Chapter End Notes

not me shoving taylor swift references into my naruto fan fiction
>.>

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Scars

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The air's filled with coarse dust, and Kakashi's ears are still ringing from the crashing of falling boulders. He's on all fours, frantically clambering over rocks that cut his hands and press painfully into the soles of his feet.

"Obito! Rin!" he gasps, coughing as acrid smoke and bitter dust fill his mouth.

"Kakashi?" a voice calls, and Rin stumbles into view. She's caked with white dust as well, bleeding from a cut on her head, but--

She's alive. That's all that matters. Rin throws her arms around him, wrapping him up in an embrace, and he lets her hold him.

"Where's Obito?" she asks, face pressed into his shoulder. Kakashi sighs.

"I can't smell through everything in the air," he says, looking around. "We have to find him before they come back."

Rin nods, already turning to search through the rubble of the collapsed cave. Kakashi starts to search around a cluster of jagged black stones, fighting to stay calm. Panic won't help in a time like this.

He still can't see out of his left eye. The gash over the left side of his face hurts like a bitch, and he can't see out of his eye anymore, and--

"K-Kakashi?" Rin says from behind him, her voice breaking. Just hearing that tone of voice is enough to send a chill through his heart. He's running to her side, tripping over protruding shards of rock, his pulse racing.

"Did you find--?" he starts to say, and then he can't speak at all.

Only half of Obito's body is visible, and the rest is covered by the boulder crushing his body. Rin looks up from where she's crouching next to the boy, her eyes shining with tears.

"I-I can't help..." she says, biting her lip. And Kakashi can't move. He can't move, he can't breathe, he can't even think. Because, well--

"Obito?" he whispers, falling to his knees. "Oh, Obito..."

"Hey, Kakashi," the boy says weakly. "I guess this is it, huh?"

"Don't say that," Kakashi says, fists clenching so hard his knuckles turn white. "Don't say things like that!"

"You aren't gonna yell at me now, are you?" Obito asks, a little smile lifting the corner of his mouth. "You're always scolding me for something."

"You always say dumb things," Kakashi replies, feeling a lump grow in his throat. Obito's next words just make it worse.

"Take my eye, Kakashi. Rin can implant it to replace the one you lost," the dark-haired boy breathes out.

"No! I can't, Obito, I can't," Kakashi babbles, squeezing Obito's fingers between his own. "How could you ask me that?"

"Because this way, there will always be a part of me with you," Obito says, and Kakashi's full-on sobbing now.

"We can still save you, there's time--" he starts to say.

"No, Kakashi," Obito says softly, his voice a little strained. "We're too old to pretend."

They're Kakashi's own words from a lifetime ago, thrown back at him at him, and he can't--

This isn't--

This isn't right. It isn't fair. And Obito laughs, a breathless, bitter, quiet chuckle.

"I wanted to grow old with you," he says to Kakashi. "I know it's silly, but I wanted to spend my whole life around you. Even if you kinda hate me."

"I couldn't hate you!" Kakashi protests, his voice hoarse. "I--never. I never did. You're a dumbass, you're an idiot, but you're my dumbass. You're my idiot."

"This is the whole story, Kakashi," Obito tells him. "This is all the time we get."

And Kakashi presses his forehead against Obito's battered torso, feeling the ragged breathing, and he howls. He screams and howls, because Obito is right. Their story ends now.

"That's why I want to give you my eye," Obito says, breaking through Kakashi's haze of grief. "If you have my eye, then it's like I'll be there with you for the rest of your life."

"Kakashi," Rin says, tugging at his arm. "If we're gonna do the transplant, I have to start it now."

"Please, Kakashi," Obito says, his voice nothing more than a coarse whisper. "It's my final request."

"Obito... I--"

"And-and... promise me you'll protect Rin?" Obito says. Kakashi nods. He nods over and over, and he can't stop nodding, because he needs Obito to know that it's alright.

"Thank you," Obito mumbles. There's a couple lazy tears dripping out from the boy's eyes now, and his hand trembles in Kakashi's grasp. "I'm scared, Kakashi. I'm scared of dying."

"I love you," Kakashi finally manages to say. He tugs down his mask and presses his chapped lips to Obito's feverish forehead, tasting the sweat and blood. "Don't leave, thinking I hated you. I don't hate you. I could never hate you--"

"Your face is the last thing I want to see," Obito says quietly, and Kakashi nods.

The world spins.

They stumble away, crying and limping and gasping, as the cave collapses entirely. Now they're out in the sunshine, and Kakashi lays prone on the floor as Rin hovers over him, her fingers shining with medical ninjutsu.

Rin whispers to him during the entire procedure, telling him it's alright. It's okay, it's fine, she says, because the people we love never really die. They live on in your heart forever, and there's no need to grieve.

But those words don't mean shit to Kakashi, because Obito is gone. He's gone, and he's never going to come back again.

The world spins again.

And now all Kakashi can hear is the chittering crackle of his Chidori, all he can see is blue-white lightning sparking around him, and all he can feel is his hand pushing deep into something warm.

Because Rin just jumped in front of him, and Kakashi's arm is buried her torso to the elbow.

Kakashi only has one friend left in the world, and he can feel the life slowly leaving her body. Rin is slumping against his chest, he's covered in her blood, and her sightless eyes bore into him.

The last thing Obito had asked was that he protect her. Kakashi hadn't protected her. She's dead. She's dead, and Kakashi is the one who killed her.

No, no, no, no!

There's a voice in his head screaming, keening, and his Sharingan flares into ripping agony. Black spots begin to dance across his vision, and he's falling to his knees. And Kakashi remembers what Rin told him once--

The people we love never really die. They live on in your heart forever, and there's no need to grieve. Kakashi repeats it like a mantra, seeking solace and relief within the words.

But he doesn't feel better. The words aren't working. They hadn't worked when Obito died, and they sure as hell don't work now. Because they're both dead. Kakashi is alone. He's alone.

He's fucking alone.

When Kakashi wakes up, hands fisting in the cheap sheets of his bed in the ANBU barracks, Tenzo is watching him with a concerned expression.

"Is it the dream again?" the man asks him, and Kakashi lets out a shaky breath.

"I--yes. I thought it was getting better, but I just--" Kakashi says, burying his face in his hands. "Tenzo, they're dead, *gods, they're dead...*"

Tenzo's crossing the narrow barracks room, sitting down on Kakashi's bunk and wrapping his arms around the silver-haired man. Kakashi just leans into him, not bothering to hide the tears sliding down his face.

Tenzo doesn't tell him it'll be alright. He doesn't try to make Kakashi

talk about it. He just sits there and holds him, making sure Kakashi's not alone.

"I'm sorry," Kakashi mumbles after a while, straightening. "Didn't mean to lose it the night before a mission."

"You don't owe me an apology," Tenzo replies smoothly. "It's not really the night before, anyway. It's five in the morning, and we should be getting ready for the escort mission."

"Fuck," Kakashi says, looking at the clock, and then down at his sweat-drenched, bare chest. "I gotta shower."

"You have time," Tenzo says. He gestures at the two empty bunks in Team Ro's room. "Where are Itachi and Shisui?"

"Shisui insisted that they sleep in their own beds at home. Some good-luck thing they do before a big mission," Kakashi says, getting up and stretching.

"If anyone needs good luck, it's the two of us," Tenzo says with a snort. "We're the ones who have to deal with them."

"I'm so hungry," Shisui whines, stretching out over the roof tiles and sighing melodramatically. The four members of Team Ro are on a roof overlooking Konoha's main gate, waiting for the signal to move out. Dawn is fast approaching, an orange-pink haze visible on the horizon.

"Didn't you eat breakfast?" Tenzo asks, and Shisui shakes his head.

"No!" he says, propping himself up on his elbows. "Itachi didn't wake me up in time to eat."

"I live on the other side of the Uchiha district," Itachi says mildly, raising his eyebrows. "Why am *I* your alarm clock?"

"I'm your responsibility. You're the future head of the Uchiha clan, after all," Shisui replies, smiling. Itachi's face remains impassive, but he pulls out a ration bar and *chucks* it at Shisui's head.

"Aw, you do care!" Shisui says in a sing-song voice, and Itachi groans.

"Shisui, please, *please* shut up," Itachi grumbles, and Tenzo tries and fails to suppress a snicker.

“Alright you two. That’s enough,” Kakashi says, pointing. “Lord Danzo’s here.”

“Alone?” Tenzo asks, brow furrowed in confusion. “I thought there’d be some diplomats and attendants coming with us...”

“Did you read the mission briefing?” Itachi asks, and Tenzo flips him off.

“They’ve been sent ahead,” Kakashi recalls from the briefing. “It’s just going to be Lord Danzo and the four of us, moving as fast as we can. This way, we minimize the time that we’re on the road and away from a proper guard contingent.”

“He’s kinda old,” Shisui says doubtfully. “Will he be able to keep up if we start going fast?”

“I will be able to keep up. I *can* hear you, you know,” an artificially-amplified voice calls out. The four of them stiffen with surprise, looking down at the street. Danzo is looking up at them, head tilted to the side.

“Let’s move out,” Kakashi says, doing his *very* best not to laugh as Shisui pulls his ANBU mask over his bright-red face.

Chapter End Notes

POV: me, depressing myself by writing sad shit at 5am in the morning

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Stalker in the Woods

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There's something wrong.

It's been an hour since they left the gates of Konoha behind, the five of them moving at a breakneck speed. Danzo easily keeps up with the members of Team Ro, his weathered face showing no hint of strain despite their brutal pace.

Yellow-orange sunlight filters through the trees, the chirping of songbirds drifts through the still air, and the only disturbance is the sound of Team Ro's sandals crushing dead leaves as they run through the forest. It's peaceful. It's quiet.

Kakashi *knows* something's wrong.

He's one of the most talented trackers currently in ANBU, a talent that his father once shared as well. He's learned to trust his instincts, because they've never led him astray. Through thick and thin, through rough times and good times, Kakashi's instincts have always been spot on.

And right now, every fiber of his being is *screaming* at him, telling him that there's something wrong here. There's something unnatural, something alien, and he can't quite put his finger on what it is. He sighs.

On paper, this is a fast and easy escort mission. It's a two day trip, straight-shot west. The first day's travels are meant to take them to one of Konoha's border outposts, where they can rest in peace. The second day's trek would take them to their destination. It's supposedly a simple trip through friendly territory.

And yet, Kakashi's skin crawls and the back of his neck prickles.

Twelve hours later, as the sun begins to set, they near their destination. The border outpost that they'll stay at for the night is small, but it houses a garrison of Konoha ninja that can keep watch while they sleep. It's still an hour away when Kakashi notices

something.

He can't smell anything.

He can't smell the flowers blooming in the grass around them, he can't smell Danzo, and he can't even smell his own teammates.

Kakashi is a Hatake; his clan's phenomenal tracking ability is legendary. Members of the clan were said to be able to sniff out and track *anyone*, regardless of how careful or stealthy they may be.

So the fact that he can't smell Shisui, who's jogging three feet in front of him, is *really* concerning.

It's like there's a shroud around him. He hadn't noticed when it had settled, but he can feel its effects now. His senses are deadened, and Kakashi's never felt anything like it. He flashes a couple of ANBU hand signals to his teammates, and the group comes to a stop. A gentle, gurgling crash can be heard through the chittering of the cicadas; they must be nearing a lake.

"Why have we stopped?" Danzo asks, turning to face Kakashi.

"Something--or someone--is following us," Kakashi replies, crossing his arms. "I haven't been able to smell or track anything all day. It's like someone is jamming my sensory jutsu."

"We're out in the open here," Danzo counters. "If there is someone following us, we should pick up the pace and reach the outpost--"

"Captain!" Tenzo interrupts, his palm pressed to a nearby tree. "There's something--"

And then Kakashi *feels* it. The surge of chakra that just flared into existence is *gargantuan*, nigh-apocalyptic in scope. It's like a hurricane, like a tsunami of energy that flashes into being. Kakashi feels *heat* pulse through the forest, the air beginning to grow uncomfortably hot. They all look up at the crest of the hill that looms above them, and Kakashi hears Shisui let out a little gasp.

A wall of fire descends, sweeping down the hillside and consuming the dense forest in seconds. It's headed straight for them.

"To the water!" Kakashi yells, remembering the gurgling noise he'd heard earlier. He can't hear it now. All he can hear as the five of them stumble away from the approaching firestorm is the crackle of flames

consuming the world.

The heat is stifling, his skin stinging as he sprints. He couldn't smell anything before, but now he smells acrid, bitter smoke. The trees thin, and the smooth expanse of a lake comes into view. There's ethereal moonlight shining on the tranquil water, but there's also the red-orange reflection from the blazing surge roaring towards them.

Kakashi doesn't hesitate, doesn't pause. He flings himself onto the surface of the lake, channeling chakra into his feet so he can run over the top of the water without sinking. Around him, his companions do the same. They run a hundred feet away from the shore, turning and watching the wall of fire come to a halt at the water's edge.

"We're out in the open," Itachi muses, and Kakashi's eyes narrow. The boy is right. The fire had flushed them out from the woods, forcing them into an open and flat area with no cover. Kakashi's about to lead them back into the woods so they have at least *some* protection, when--

When the flames at the lake's edge fade and die out, and a figure steps out from the smoke. The figure is silhouetted by the hot smolder of the raging fire, and Kakashi can tell it's a man.

And his gut tells him that it's not just any ordinary man. This man had deadened Kakashi's senses and followed them without detection for hours. This man had generated a mountain-sized fireball with contemptuous ease. This man attacked a full ANBU team with no hesitation whatsoever.

This man is *dangerous*. Kakashi looks over at Itachi.

"Take Lord Danzo and keep going towards the outpost. We'll deal with this, and catch up with you," he says, and Itachi nods. Kakashi turns his gaze back to the mysterious man.

The black-cloaked man steps on the surface of the lake and slowly walks towards them.

Chapter End Notes

future!sasuke being a dramatic-ass bitch

twitter: [@baja_heaux](https://twitter.com/baja_heaux)

Letting Loose

Chapter Notes

You know how I was like "oh this fic is on hiatus"?

I LIED.

Im back, bitches

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The hot air smells like smoke and scorched earth as Sasuke takes a deep breath in, letting his eyes open. The crackle of burning and falling trees around him is deafening, but his Sharingan easily picks out five chakra-signatures through the smoke.

Three of the signatures--Danzo's guards, presumably--fan out, coming closer to the water's edge. His quarry is fleeing, two signatures sprinting away into the distance. It's fine, though. Danzo can run all he wants. It won't do him any good.

He'll just die tired.

Sasuke strides across the surface of the water, watching as three masked ninja step into the flickering light of the inferno behind him. They're moving slowly, as if they're wary, and--

They're not Root.

He stops moving for a second, taking a second look at the porcelain masks these ninja bear. These aren't Root ninja, they're *ANBU*, and Sasuke can see a *very* distinctive shock of silver hair poking out from behind one of the masks.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

This is Kakashi's ANBU team. He *can't* just rip through them. He doesn't want to hurt them. And because he can't kill them, he can't reveal that he possesses the Sharingan and the Rinnegan. Gritting his teeth, he lets the Sharingan fade away and closes his Rinnegan.

"Who are you?" The silver-haired ANBU asks, and an involuntary tremor wracks Sasuke's body. Because that's *Kakashi's* voice. The last time he'd heard that voice had been the day his version of Kakashi

died. It had been the day Kakashi had murmured a couple breathless words in his ear--

I'll always be proud of you, Sasuke.

"Surrender now. You have one chance," Kakashi's voice calls out, and Sasuke clenches his fists to stop them from shaking.

"Get out of my way," Sasuke says, his voice low and tense.

It's a split-second distraction. Sasuke's gaze is locked on Kakashi, and he almost misses the flurry of motion from the ANBU to his right. The world lights up as a fireball races towards him, impossibly bright and lethally hot.

He body-flickers a dozen feet back, sweat springing up on his brow as the roaring flames surge past him. It's a flashy attack, too slow moving to actually hit him, but it corrals Sasuke into the shallows by the lake's edge.

Then the water around him explodes upwards. Vines, woody and coarse, erupt from the silty lakebed to wrap themselves around Sasuke's hands and legs, winding themselves painfully tight. He groans. That's *just* great.

One of the ANBU has Wood Release.

What the *fuck*?

Blue lightning crackles up and down his limbs, burning and blasting the vines away as Sasuke retreats to the relative safety of land. Hazy steam rises from where the fireball had skimmed the water's surface, obscuring the ANBU squad temporarily.

Until Kakashi bursts from mist, moving with breathtaking speed as electric sparks arc over his muscles. Sasuke falls into the same trap again; he's so focused on Kakashi's headlong charge that he doesn't notice the black-haired ANBU until a fist is slamming into his ribs, driving the breath from his lungs.

He retreats further, until the heat of the forest fire is at his back, wary and bewildered. He hadn't even seen that ANBU *move*--

Sasuke spots the black-haired ninja again, moving to his right with such speed that he leaves behind afterimages. He's body-flickering, Sasuke realizes. There's only one Leaf ninja known for mastering that

technique to *that* degree.

With a twinge of annoyance, he recognizes the black-haired ANBU as Shisui Uchiha. Another thicket of vines bursts from the ground, trying to wrap themselves around his leg. He spins away, only to look up and find Kakashi bearing down on him.

This is shaping up to be a miserable day.

Kakashi moves and strikes with fluid rapidity, his tanto whistling as it slices through the air. Sasuke dodges one, two, five, ten slashes, then grunts as Shisui lands a kick to his side that sends him sprawling.

He hits the ground with a dull thud, breathless and already rolling back to his feet. There's a tug on his cloak as Kakashi's blade slashes through the dark material. But Sasuke's been gathering his chakra, and with a smirk, he lets it out.

His eyes water as the world turns white. It's a wall of molten fury, a firestorm flowing over the charred ground. Shisui blurs and disappears as he flickers away from it, but Kakashi's fingers fly as they weave a half-dozen hand signs.

Kakashi's fireball slams into Sasuke's jutsu with a boom that makes his *teeth* shake. Red-orange, snarling tendrils of fire climb into the sky, and a blast of bone-dry, hot air nearly knocks Sasuke over. For a moment, all Sasuke can see is the searing-bright afterimage of the blast.

And then the flames part as a massive wooden golem emerges, a giant fist hurtles towards him. Sasuke barely dodges the blow, landing on all fours as the fist smashes into the earth and the ground shakes and bucks wildly under him. Vines surge over Sasuke's arms, pinning him to the ground and draining chakra from his body. He curses as more vines wrap around his ankles, holding him prone.

Shit. He hadn't realized how out-of-practice he was at fighting without the Sharingan or the Rinnegan. Craning his head to his right, he can see Kakashi charging at him again.

Sasuke sighs. He's just going to have to wipe their memories after this. It can't be helped. He opens his Rinnegan, feeling time slow down as his perception widens. The seconds pass slowly, each one ringing in his head.

One.

Kakashi's almost upon him, hand already raised to deliver a crushing blow. To the side, Sasuke sees Shisui standing still, weaving some jutsu. It only takes a split second--

Two.

There's a sharp pop of displaced air as Sasuke exchanges their locations, standing where Shisui just stood a moment ago. He turns towards the lake, spotting the Wood Release user standing behind his golem.

Three.

A pained squawk rings out as Kakashi strikes Shisui by accident, and Sasuke can't help but chuckle as he extends one palm towards the Wood Release user. Chakra thrums under his skin.

“Universal Pull.”

Four.

The Wood Release user struggles frantically to arrest his forward motion, summoning vines to ensnare and entangle himself, but he's moving far too fast for that. Sasuke lets lightning-chakra crackle and swirl around his fist.

Five.

Sasuke slams the paralyzing punch into the Wood Release ANBU's jaw, sending his unconscious form flying away. He turns his attention to Kakashi, who's pulling Shisui to his feet.

Six.

Shisui and Kakashi's fingers move in unison, forming a familiar sequence of hand signs. *This* fireball is much larger than the earlier ones that had been hurled at Sasuke; it blocks out everything in his field of vision as it rips through the air.

Seven.

Eight.

The fireball warps and distorts, swirling into Sasuke's palm as he absorbs the jutsu. He lets the stolen power rush through him for a second, then flexes his palm.

“Almighty Push.”

Nine.

Kakashi hurls himself to one side, narrowly dodging the attack. Shisui--probably still dazed from Kakashi's strike--isn't fast enough. There's a yelp as the jutsu picks him up and hurls him backwards, out of sight.

Ten.

Now it's just Kakashi, swaying a little as he stares Sasuke down. His chakra flares, and Sasuke tenses, but it's not directed at him. Clouds of dust, ash, and dirt rise into the air, obfuscating Sasuke's vision and making him cough. He can't see anything through the haze--

Eleven.

And then he hears the chirping of a thousand song birds, a grating clamour that makes the back of his neck prickle. He knows this noise intimately well.

Chidori.

He lets his Sharingan spin into existence, searching through the blinding dust clouds.

Twelve.

Thirteen.

Fourteen.

Sasuke whirls around, letting his Rinnegan drain the lightning chakra from Kakashi's Chidori as he catches Kakashi's fist with one hand. For a moment, he can see Kakashi's startled, heterochromatic gaze.

Then he returns the lightning chakra as a crackle of paralyzing energy, shocking Kakashi into unconsciousness.

Fifteen.

Kakashi hits the ground, and everything is still and silent now.

The three ANBU lay side-by-side in the dirt, tied up neatly with their

own ninja wire and their masks stacked in a pile to their left. Sasuke scowls as he gets to his feet, gingerly feeling his ribs.

That's going to bruise.

He lets out a slow breath, wincing as he stretches. With his Sharingan, he can faintly see Danzo's chakra signature in the woods on the other side of the lake, moving fast.

"What is he running for?" he grumbles to himself, rolling his shoulders. Sasuke casts one last look at the incapacitated ANBU. He'd taken off their masks to wipe their memories of the past day, and his gaze keeps landing on Kakashi's face.

Kakashi's still wearing his signature mask over the lower half of his face. Sasuke had left it on. The silver-haired man's face is relaxed, unguarded, and it's just--

He *really* misses the Kakashi he knew. He didn't think he would. It doesn't even make sense. They hadn't been very close during the war at all, but--

You don't get to choose who you care about.

Naruto used to say that to him a lot. Sasuke clears his throat and looks away. This is *ridiculous*. This isn't even *his* Kakashi.

The man lying unconscious in front of him is the same age as him, with none of the easygoing gentleness Kakashi had exhibited later in life. For all intents and purposes, this is a different person.

Sasuke shakes his head as he begins to stride across the water, towards Danzo. He has more important things to think about right now.

Chapter End Notes

not the anbu boys getting wiped out in fifteen seconds :,(

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Brothers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Itachi stays focused on the mission.

He's not a sensory specialist, but he can still *feel* the rest of his team engaging the stranger. The battle's a constant prickle at the edge of his consciousness, one that he pushes down and ignores.

He has a job to do.

Danzo keeps pace with him, and they're crashing through the underbrush. This isn't the time for stealth, this isn't the time for finesse. This is the time to run, as fast as they can, until his breathing turns ragged and his legs hurt.

Because there's something wrong.

The stranger by the lake had been entirely *too* sure of himself, too confident. He's engaged a whole ANBU team with no hesitation. And the fact that the battle is still raging, that it's not over within seconds--

Itachi *knows* something's very wrong.

At the very edge of his awareness, an alien presence flares into existence. Itachi comes to a halt, looking over his shoulder in the direction of the lake.

"What is it?" Danzo snaps, and Itachi shakes his head.

"I just--what is that?" he says breathlessly.

"We have to head towards the outpost. Don't forget your mission," Danzo replies curtly.

"There's something wrong. Can't you feel it?" Itachi asks.

Danzo doesn't answer him, but rather, starts to run again. Itachi's throat tightens with anger, and he clenches his fists so hard his knuckles turn white. Tenzo, Kakashi, *Shisui*--they would have laid their lives down without hesitation to protect Danzo.

There's a good chance that they already have.

And Danzo can't be bothered to even feign interest in their fates? He doesn't even *care*?

But that's what it means to be an ANBU. It means putting the good of the village above everything, even over the people he loves.

He's an ANBU. Letting out a slow breath, he resumes running, following Danzo. He doesn't know if his team, if his *friends*, are okay, but--

Itachi stays focused on the mission.

Sasuke's moving so fast the wind whips the hood of his cloak down, letting air rush through his short, choppy locks of hair. The mask shields his face from the worst of the wind as he moves faster than the eye can see, darting between trees soundlessly.

His heart's racing, his palms are sweating, and his mouth's dry. Because--

Because ANBU work in teams of four, and he's only fought three so far. Because there's a presence accompanying Danzo, up ahead. Because he knows the fourth member of Kakashi's ANBU team.

And Sasuke's terrified to see Itachi again.

"Itachi!" he yells, wrapping his brother in a big hug. He'd missed Itachi, but he knows his brother has to go to the Academy now. "Can we play?"

Itachi's solemn face breaks into a slight smile, and Sasuke laughs as his brother hugs him back.

"Of course we can, Sasuke."

Sasuke lets the pounding of his feet against the hard earth fill his mind, trying to drive the memories away. But that's never worked before, and it doesn't work now.

"Itachi!" Sasuke screams, soggy hair falling into his blood-red eyes. He's on all fours, trembling violently. "Why? Why would you do this?"

Itachi turns to face him, his face blank. But Sasuke knows him. He knows his brother. He knows the pain in his eyes. And he can tell what comes next is a lie.

“A test of my own power,” Itachi says softly, not meeting his gaze. And Sasuke doesn’t have a reply. Because what can he say to such an obvious lie?

He’s not in the *fucking* mood for this. Sasuke tries to think about Danzo, about revenge, about anything else. It’s stupid, pointless to think about these things now. If Sasuke has his way, the Uchiha Massacre will never happen. Itachi will never leave the Leaf Village.

But that doesn’t erase the pain Sasuke carries with him. It doesn’t erase the *hurt*.

They’re surrounded by ruined masonry and black flames. The swirling red-orange of Itachi’s Susanoo is gone now, and it’s just the two of them. Sasuke’s back is against a slab of stone, and he’s too exhausted to even move as Itachi reaches out one hand towards him.

This is the end of the road. This is where Sasuke’s quest for revenge has driven them. This is the moment where it’s all over.

But Itachi doesn’t claw out his eye. He doesn’t burn Sasuke alive. He doesn’t cast a jutsu. He just presses a finger against Sasuke’s forehead, his voice raspy as he whispers something.

“I’m sorry, Sasuke. This is it.” And then Itachi, his big brother, the man he’s loved and hated all his life--

He falls to the ground, limp and unmoving. And Sasuke’s shaking, he can’t stop fucking shaking, because that’s Itachi. That’s Itachi, and he’s gone.

He’s gone.

This is the end of the road. Everything he’s ever done has led to this. And he’s never felt more alone.

And now Sasuke stops moving, his throat raw, and he’s standing in a clearing. Now he’s not alone. There’s two figures in front of him, whirling around to face him. Danzo’s right there, wrapped in a travelling cloak, but Sasuke barely notices. He only has eyes for the young ANBU with black hair and a raven mask, walking slowly towards him.

He only has eyes for Itachi.

That’s the way it’s always been, really.

Chapter End Notes

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I Won't Let You Fall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Itachi.”

It’s a hoarse whisper from the masked stranger, a whisper that’s filled with regret and pain and *hurt*--

But Itachi’s hurting too.

Because this stranger stands here, before him, which means Tenzo, and Kakashi, and Shisui are all gone. They’re all dead. And maybe that’s just what life as an ANBU is, maybe losing comrades is just part of the job. But Itachi’s in pain, and he’s furious, and the only thing he can think is that *he’s going to kill this stranger* for what he’s done.

He’s running at the masked man, his eyes swirling into red. All he can hear is the pounding of his heartbeat, all he can feel is the cool hilt of his tanto in his sweaty palm, and all he can taste is the metallic tang of blood as he digs his teeth into his tongue.

“Itachi,” the stranger says, a little louder, taking a step back. His voice is still pleading, still desperate. “Itachi, *please*. Stop.”

Some part of him is alarmed that the stranger knows his name. It’s the same part of him that urges caution, that screams at him to be careful. But there’s fire streaming from Itachi’s mouth now, and there’s fire burning in his heart too. And as he bears down on the masked man, all he can think about is *revenge*.

Fire and smoke swirl into Sasuke’s palm as he absorbs Itachi’s attack, and he catches Itachi’s forearm with one hand. Now it’s just the two of them, Itachi struggling to push the blade of his tanto through Sasuke’s body. He looks through the eye-holes of Itachi’s ANBU mask, and all he can see are glowing red irises.

He can’t do this.

He *can’t* fight Itachi. He can’t raise his hand against his brother. Sasuke swallows past the lump in his throat, his free hand coming to

rest on Itachi's shoulder. There was a time when all he wanted was to kill his older brother. But that was before he knew the truth. That was a lifetime ago.

His fingers tighten and tremble, feeling Itachi's solid warmth. Then--

Sasuke lets out a startled gasp as Itachi's body dissolves into a dozen ravens, screwing his eyes shut as he's battered by blunt, feathered wings. The birds scatter, and the only sound he can hear is their cawing, slowly fading away. *It's a clone? But--*

And then he hurls himself forward, but it's not quite fast enough to avoid the tip of Itachi's blade cutting through his cloak, through his shirt, carving a shallow cut across the muscles of his lower back. Sasuke lets out an involuntary hiss, catching Itachi's next strike on his armguard.

He flexes his other palm, and Itachi goes sprawling, bowled over by an invisible force. Lightning sparks down his other arm, and he discharges it in a surge of blue light meant to daze and stun.

But when the lightning slams into Itachi's prone form, another dozen crows take flight.

Sasuke shakes his head, trying to clear his mind as he looks around. He's off-balance, he's upset, and he's fucking frustrated. Itachi just needs to stop, just for a second, just to hear him out. Sasuke doesn't want--he *can't*--

He already killed his brother once. He can still see Itachi's corpse, still feel Itachi's finger poking his forehead, still feel his eyes burning as tears trace lines through the dirt on his cheeks.

He never wants to hurt Itachi ever again.

Sasuke's Sharingan picks up a flare of chakra, a hundred feet away. Itachi crouches atop a rocky outcropping, quickly forming hand-signs. Sasuke draws and throws a kunai in one fluid motion--

A massive dragon, made entirely of scorching, white-hot fire, screams through the trees towards him. Sasuke absorbs it, letting the dragon swirl away into nothing.

And then there's a second dragon bearing down on him from the side, heating the air until it's unbearably hot. Sasuke raises a hand.

“Almighty Push.”

The fire-dragon and forest surrounding it disappear in a cloud of dust and smoke, splinters of wood raining down all around him. A dull roar fills the air, a thrumming vibration that makes the hair on his arms stand up, and he looks up as three more fire-dragons streak towards him from the sky. They're blinding-bright, and there's sweat beading on Sasuke's brow from the heat, the *searing* heat--

Then Sasuke exchanges places with the kunai he'd thrown earlier.

There's the familiar pop of displaced air, and he's so close to Itachi that he can hear his brother's gasp of surprise. He grabs Itachi's right arm, forcing the tip of the tanto towards the ground and staring into startled red eyes. Far behind him, there's an ear-splitting *boom* as Itachi's dragon jutsu explodes, and the ground bucks under their feet.

Under his fingers, he feels Itachi's skin begin to crawl and transform. But Sasuke's not going to fall for the same trick twice. So when the *real* Itachi tries to run him through, tries to shove his sword through Sasuke's heart, Sasuke swaps places with the clone.

This time, when the blue-white lightning hits Itachi, he lets out a pained cry. Sasuke sees his brother's body go limp, and Itachi begins to fall off the side of the outcropping. Sasuke inhales sharply--

Itachi's finger slides down his face, the smile on his older brother's face going slack as the light leaves his eyes. His body slumps forward, and Sasuke wants to catch him, Sasuke wants to hold onto him and never let him go, but--

But he doesn't.

He lets Itachi fall, closing his eyes as his brother hits the ground with a thud.

Sasuke grabs Itachi by the collar, almost losing his balance. With a shaky breath, he pulls his brother back up, Itachi's weight settling in his arms. And Sasuke--

He lets out a noise that sounds suspiciously like a sob, and he hugs his brother. He hugs Itachi with all the strength in his arms, pressing his face into Itachi's chest, listening to his brother's steady heartbeat.

And Itachi won't remember any of this. Sasuke will wipe his memory of the whole encounter, and he'll never know anything about *any* of

this. But as he jumps down from the outcropping and lays Itachi on his back, gently, he whispers into his brother's ear.

"I'll never let you fall, Itachi."

Danzo watches him, standing in the middle of the clearing as Sasuke stalks towards him. Sasuke can't help but snort with amusement, shaking his head. The man hadn't even *tried* to run.

"That was impressive," Danzo says, and Sasuke had forgotten how much he *loathed* that voice. "Incapacitating an entire ANBU team is no mean feat."

Sasuke doesn't bother responding as he comes to a stop, two dozen feet away from the other man. He lets out a deep breath, taking off his mask and clipping it to his belt. Sasuke meets Danzo's gaze with one red eye, and one purple.

"Have you come to kill me?" Danzo asks him, and Sasuke's lips twist into a lopsided smirk.

"Yes."

"I see. I'm afraid you'll be disappointed," Danzo says, fiddling with something under his traveling cloak. There's a *thunk* of something heavy and metallic hitting the ground, and Danzo lets the cloak fall to the ground. Sasuke looks at the pale flesh of Danzo's implanted arm with a bored expression, noting the implanted Sharingan blinking back at him.

"You've never fought anyone like me," Danzo says.

"I wouldn't say that," Sasuke says. He can't help grinning, letting the Six Paths' chakra rush through him. He doesn't have to hold back now, and it feels *good*.

"There's no escape from this now," Danzo says softly, taking a step forward.

"None," Sasuke says with a dark laugh.

Chapter End Notes

i've had to break this whole fight sequence into so many parts because it was getting soooo long... ah well. This chapter was one

of my favorites to plan and write, hope yall enjoyed it

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With Great Vengeance and Furious Anger

Chapter Notes

CHAOS

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Sasuke wakes up, he can't move. His wrists and ankles are bound tightly with coarse rope that chafes against his skin, and his knees throb from hours spent pressed against the hard stone floor. There's something tied over his eyes, and all he can see is black.

For a second, there's a terrifying sense of disorientation sweeping over him. He can't remember what happened, where he is now, or even his own name.

And then the moment passes. He remembers now.

His name is Sasuke Uchiha, and he just killed his brother. Itachi Uchiha, the man who wiped out his own clan, is dead now. And Sasuke should feel triumph, should feel satisfaction--

But all he feels is a hollowness in his chest and a lump in his throat. Because all he wants to do right now is break down and cry, to let the tears fall for the brother he once knew.

He misses the Itachi who would play with him in the meadows outside the village. He misses the Itachi who'd carry him in his arms when he got tired. He misses the Itachi who'd sleep in his bed when he was little to keep the nightmares away.

And nothing Itachi does will ever change that. There's nothing that can fully erase this bond. And while Sasuke hates what he did, hates Itachi for what happened, there's still a part of him that doesn't.

This is the shameful, shameful truth. In the end, under all the pain, under all the hatred, Sasuke Uchiha loves his brother.

Loved. He loved his brother. Itachi's dead now.

A strangled breath escapes him as he struggles to keep the tears back. He can't cry, not for Itachi. He can't break down now. He has to be strong.

But Sasuke's spent his whole life trying to be strong. When he was a kid, he

wanted to be strong like Itachi. When he grew up, he wanted to be strong enough to stop Itachi. And now that Itachi's gone, he--

He doesn't know how to be strong anymore. He doesn't have anything to be strong for.

So the rough blindfold over his eyes grows a little damp, and his breathing grows a little labored.

Then a rich voice, layered with majesty and malice, rings in his ears. It's deep, mesmerizing, and prideful, and Sasuke flinches as he hears it.

"You're awake."

The blindfold is ripped away, and Sasuke cringes at the sudden brightness. He opens his eyes slowly, cautiously, taking in the man standing before him.

"Who are you?" he asks, hating the way his voice falters. The man steps into the light, a swirled orange mask covering his face. There's a red glow coming from the single, dark eye-hole of the mask, and Sasuke can't breathe.

"My name is Madara Uchiha," the man says, leaning closer. But Sasuke's vision blurs, there's a sharp pain in his eye, and he can feel blood vessels bursting--

Heat.

The room's suddenly hot, the stench of burning flesh filling his nostrils and making him gag. Agonised screams fill the room, ringing off the walls until his head hurts.

And then there's laughter. Booming laughter echoes through the room, and the masked man steps back into the light.

"What was that?" Sasuke asks, scooting as far back as he can while bound. The man tilts his head.

"One last trap, set by Itachi Uchiha," he says, amused. "His final attempt to protect you, Sasuke."

No. No, that's not possible.

"What? What did you say?" Sasuke says, his voice growing shrill. Itachi didn't--he wouldn't protect him, not after--

“He spent his whole life protecting you. It’s only fitting that he tried to do so in death, too,” the man says, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms.

Now Sasuke’s confusion turns to anger.

“That’s--shut up!” he snarls at the man, spit flying from his lips. “Don’t say another word! Itachi was a monster! He killed our parents, our clan--”

“You think you know everything about your brother,” Madara says, interrupting him. “But you were deceived. Remember your gentle older brother, and ask yourself this: do you really think he would have hurt you willingly?”

“You’re lying!” Sasuke screams, scrunching his eyes closed, struggling wildly against his restraints. But the anger’s giving way to the doubt that’s always been there, and he can’t stop thinking about the cracks in the story he’s been told. He can’t--

He can feel Itachi’s arms around him. He can see the unshed tears glimmering in Itachi’s eyes as he stands over the bodies of their parents. He can hear Itachi’s final words, delivered in a raspy whisper:

‘I’m sorry, Sasuke. This is it.’

Sasuke looks upon the masked man with growing horror as the puzzle pieces fall into place, trembling as his world falls apart.

“You will know the truth of how Itachi lived, and how he died,” Madara says, grabbing Sasuke’s chin and forcing his face up. “It is your obligation. Because every action Itachi ever took was to save you, his younger brother.”

And Sasuke desperately tries to shake his head, to struggle, to hide from Madara’s words. But in his heart, he knows the truth. Tears break loose without abandon, accompanied by hiccuping sobs and strangled breaths.

Because this is the inescapable, cruel truth: Sasuke has killed the one person who loved him the most.

Sasuke stares into the face of the man who destroyed his life. Danzo’s lips are moving as he draws near, but Sasuke can’t hear a word he’s saying. The sound of his own heartbeat is a wardrum, throbbing in his head until he can’t feel, until he can’t even think. Danzo’s still talking,

and Sasuke swallows once, then opens his mouth.

“Amaterasu.”

Black fire spreads over Danzo’s chest, blossoming like some infernal flower over the man’s patchwork flesh. A horrific stench fills the air and Sasuke’s eyes water as the air heats up. Now he can hear again, and he hears--

He hears Danzo’s screaming.

The burning corpse falls to the ground, convulsing in the dirt, and he can’t look away. It’s entrancing, it’s cathartic, it’s *euphoric*, and a hysterical laugh slips out from Sasuke’s lips as the black flames burn the body to ash.

Danzo’s remains vanish, and reality distorts as he appears again, healthy and whole. There’s a smirk on his face as one of the eyes on his arm closes.

“I told you, you’ve never faced anyone like me before,” Danzo says, and Sasuke can’t help doubling over with another fit of laughter.

Because maybe the first time he’d fought Danzo, this would have been intimidating. Maybe when he was a scared, angry fifteen-year-old, Danzo’s apparent invulnerability would have been terrifying.

But Sasuke’s not that scared little boy anymore.

And even as Danzo raises his hands, forming signs, Sasuke can’t stop *laughing*.

Blades of wind hiss as they glide towards him. Sasuke remembers this jutsu, remembers how the lethal, chakra-infused air was capable of slicing through solid stone. But when the jutsu reaches him, he absorbs it. A gentle breeze ruffles his hair.

Danzo looks at him in disbelief, but he’s already casting another jutsu. The ground’s shifting under Sasuke’s feet, blocky vines and misshapen wooden spikes bursting from the earth around him. It’s Wood Release, unrefined and rudimentary, but still potent. The plant growth surrounds Sasuke, boxing him in.

More fuel for the fire.

The fireball that Sasuke spits out dwarfs those made earlier by Kakashi

or Shisui, or even Itachi. *This* jutsu is the size of several city blocks, a cataclysm that rips through the forest. Decades-old trees are reduced to blasted stumps in seconds; vibrant meadows turn to cracked, heat-blasted remains. Danzo's chakra is lost in the sea of yellow-white flames, his dying scream lost in the roar of the blast.

When the older man appears again, standing amidst the smouldering ruins of what had been a vibrant forest just moments ago, he's backing away warily. Sasuke smiles at him, letting his chakra bleed into the soil and bedrock under his feet. There's a low rumble.

The ground explodes, boulders and outcroppings rupting all around them, massive chunks of rock slamming together with crushing force. Sasuke lets out a slow breath and watches Danzo's frantic movements as he slowly rips the very earth apart. Danzo dodges once, twice, five times--

Then Sasuke crushes him between two sheer stone outcroppings, so suddenly that Danzo doesn't even have time to make a noise. This time, when Danzo reappears, Sasuke can see the fear on the man's craggy face. And it feels *good*.

Danzo's fingers form the signs for another wind jutsu, and a smirk plays over Sasuke's face as he prepares to absorb it. But the other man directs the blast of wind down into the spiky, jagged terrain created by Sasuke's earth jutsu. Dust and dirt rise into the air, blocking his vision.

But with his Sharingan, he can see Danzo's chakra signature. It's retreating, moving at blistering speed away from him.

Danzo's running.

Sasuke rolls his eyes.

And then he reaches deep inside himself, reaching inside a place he hasn't visited in a long, long time. There's an old fire in here, one that burns hot and fast, and Sasuke feeds it. It's a familiar sensation, coursing down his arms and legs and coiling in his stomach.

Pain, searing and sudden, races through his body, and it feels *fucking* fantastic. Now the purple fire dances over his skin, scorching the ground beneath him and taking his breath away. For a moment, the purple flames surrounding him whirl in a tight circle--

Then they explode outwards, soaring three hundred feet into the air

and vaporizing everything caught within them. Sasuke feels a dizzying headrush, an intoxicating surge of power as he shoots into the air. He looks down, his gaze sliding over armored purple limbs and majestic wings.

Sasuke's Susanoo blocks out the moon.

He holds out a hand, and his Susanoo mirrors the motion, making the air around him shimmer with heat. A spectral bow coalesces into existence, a hundred feet tall, lightning crackling down its length. Sasuke hefts the bow, drawing back on the electric string. Flocks of birds take flight from the scorched forest around him; he pays them no mind.

His focus is on the tiny speck of Danzo's chakra, accelerating as he runs up the crest of the nearest hill. For a second, Sasuke basks in the sensation. Maintaining the Susanoo sends invigorating waves of pain rolling through his body, like jumping into an icy pond. The very air thrums and throbs with the crackle of lightning and the rush of his power. He lets out a breath, and lets the spectral arrow fly. For a moment, the sky shakes violently as the very air is split asunder, and then--

Then the world turns white.

Sasuke walks through the crater that had once been a lush valley. He lets his chakra flow out from him, putting out fires, clearing away smoke, and cooling the superheated earth so he can walk over it. The air smells like burning wood and ozone, and residual power crackles through the air and makes his mouth taste like iron.

There's a Leaf outpost a dozen miles to the west, and Sasuke *knows* that a patrol is probably on its way to investigate. But he has unfinished business here.

He finds Danzo in the middle of the crater, taking cover behind a chunk of blackened limestone the size of a house. Sasuke body flickers forward, sitting down on the rock and looking down at his prey.

"I got a little carried away, didn't I?" he asks lightly, gesturing at the barren landscape. Danzo stumbles away, struggling to put some distance between them.

"Who are you?" he says, his once-smug voice now dripping with fear.

Sasuke jumps down from the rock, walking across charred soil as he saunters towards the other man. Danzo quickly weaves a jutsu, sending a dozen wind-blades screaming through the fraut air.

Sasuke absorbs the jutsu without blinking, still leisurely walking forward. Danzo trips over his own feet in exhaustion, casting another jutsu. This time it's massive wooden spears, bursting from the ash-covered ground to impale him. Sasuke raises an eyebrow as he swaps places with the other man. The pop of displaced air is drowned out by Danzo's agonized groan as he's impaled by his own jutsu.

Sasuke turns around slowly. There's only one Sharingan left on Danzo's body now. There's only one more use of Izanagi left. He's almost *sad* about that. Killing Danzo in numerous different ways has been somewhat entertaining.

His Chidori rends through Danzo's torso with such force that the old man's body is quite literally ripped apart, blood and bone splattering all over the ground. And when Danzo reappears for the last time, he's on all fours. Sasuke examines the panting, spent man before him, then speaks.

"I'm Sasuke Uchiha, to answer your question," he says. Danzo looks up, bewilderment evident on his face.

"Itachi's younger brother? But--"

"Don't say his name!" Sasuke snarls, cutting him off. "Keep his name out of your worthless mouth."

For a long second, Danzo examines him. There's no more fear in that dead gaze, just resignation. Both of them know that this is the end. Sasuke turns away, examining the way the moonlight gilds the smoke hanging over the crater with ghostly, white-silver light.

"Itachi had a friend when I was a kid. His name was Shisui," Sasuke says, closing his eyes. "He was like another older brother to me. He'd always take me to eat out with him, and we'd play pranks on Itachi together."

Sasuke feels Danzo's chakra flare, and he absorbs the wind-blade that would have decapitated him without turning around. He continues to speak.

"He killed himself because of you. Gouged out his remaining eye and jumped into a waterfall. Can you imagine that?" Sasuke asks, turning

to face Danzo and opening his eyes. “Going blind, and then slowly drowning?”

Danzo stiffens as Sasuke grabs him by the hair, pulling him roughly to his feet. Sasuke examines Danzo’s remaining eye, then snorts with derision, tossing the man back to the ground. He holds out his hand, palm facing up, and a ball of murky water swirls into existence. It churns around roughly, splashing everywhere, as Danzo looks up with poorly suppressed horror.

“I’ve heard drowning is a very painful way to die,” Sasuke remarks, watching the spinning ball of brown water suspended in the air. “But other people have described it as being almost peaceful. I hope, for your sake, that’s the case.”

Danzo doesn’t even have time to cry out before Sasuke lets the water rush forward, surrounding the older man’s head. It regains its spinning-ball shape, this time with Danzo’s head inside. Danzo begins to struggle, hands flying up in a futile attempt to claw at the water. Muffled noises can be heard over the sloshing of water, the desperate final pleas of a man doomed to die.

Sasuke watches dispassionately as Danzo thrashes around in the dirt. He watches as the man’s movements slow. He watches until Danzo’s body goes limp, the life leaving his tortured form. Then, and only then, does Sasuke let the water splatter all over the ground, sinking into the earth.

For a long moment, he stares at the face of the man who had once destroyed his life. And then, smiling faintly, he turns around and walks away.

Chapter End Notes

beta'd by outstorm, who also mentioned that the whole angry dark!Sasuke vibe is INCREDIBLY hot.

I mean, she's not wrong...

twitter: [@baja_heaux](https://twitter.com/baja_heaux)

Bridges Burned

Chapter Notes

this chapter wasn't even in the outline for this fic

and this shit took a week to write >.>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The quiet office rings with the sound of a firm knock on the door, and Hiruzen Sarutobi, Konoha's famed Third Hokage, awakens with a start. The faint glow of the approaching sunrise filters through the windows behind him, and the papers stacked in front of him cast long shadows over his desk. He grimaces as he rubs the sleep from his eyes.

He'd fallen asleep in his office again.

Hiruzen is still massaging the kink in his neck, cursing his uncomfortable chair, when the knock on the door repeats itself.

"Come in," he grumbles, wincing as he forces himself to stand. The door opens with a click and a creak, and Shikaku Nara steps into the first rays of the dawning sun. There are dark circles under his eyes, and he's deathly pale.

"Shikaku?" Hiruzen says, a note of concern creeping into his voice. The other man looks at him, speechless, and Hiruzen frowns. "Is something wrong?"

It's a pointless question. *Something's* the matter, or else Konoha's jounin commander wouldn't be barging into his office at the crack of dawn. Shikaku walks further into the room slowly, coming up to his desk. Hiruzen can tell the other man's just gotten out of bed; his eyes are lidded with sleep and wayward strands of messy black hair frame his face.

But then Shikaku speaks, and Hiruzen frowns.

"What?" he asks Shikaku, leaning forward. "I--what?"

Shikaku sets the folder he's been gripping tightly on Hiruzen's desk, swallowing nervously.

"Lord Danzo is dead."

And for a long moment, Hiruzen Sarutobi stares at the wall in numb shock.

The sun has risen by now, and the office is bathed in ethereal, golden light. It looks dreamlike. He *feels* like he's in a dream. What Shikaku's saying--it's not real. It *can't* be--

Shikaku's lips are moving, and he forces himself to listen.

"...jounin from Outpost 34, twenty miles from the border with Suna, investigated the disturbance. This," Shikaku says, gesturing at the folder on Hiruzen's desk, "is the report we just received from them."

Hiruzen slides the beige folder towards himself, fingertips sliding over the smooth, stiff cardstock. He lets out a deep breath before looking up to meet Shikaku's gaze.

"Give me the gist of it," he says, his voice calm and betraying nothing of the emotion surging under the surface. Shikaku clasps his hands behind him.

"The scout team found Lord Danzo's body shortly after arriving on the scene. It's being transported back now for a proper examination and autopsy," he says. "All four members of Team Ro were recovered. They're all stable, no critical injuries, but they're under some form of genjutsu that we haven't been able to lift yet."

"There's something else," Hiruzen says, examining the tense lines of Shikaku's face. The other man sighs, reaching for the folder between Hiruzen's hands. He opens it, rifling through the papers within until he pulls out a collection of photographs.

They're pictures of Danzo's corpse.

He breathes in sharply.

Hiruzen's seen plenty of bodies. He's a warrior. He's fought in multiple world wars. Gore and death are two things he's familiar with seeing. But--

But to see his old comrade sprawled face-down in the dirt still *hurts*.

He looks up, a question in his eyes, but Shikaku gestures towards the sheaf of photos.

"Keep looking through them," he says quietly, and Hiruzen obliges.

The second shot is a close-up of Danzo's torso. Now Hiruzen can see where his old friend's tanned skin ends, and the pale flesh starts. His right arm is covered with wrinkly, white skin, studded with circular indentations.

Then he realizes they aren't indentations. They're eyes.

Danzo's arm is covered with closed eyes, and Hiruzen looks on in horrified fascination. His hands are a little unsteady as he shuffles to the next photograph. A pair of gloved hands hold one of the eyes open, exposing a pure, silvery iris. And Hiruzen's breath catches in his throat, the picture fluttering from his numb fingers down to the desk. He hasn't seen Izanagi used in decades, not since the Second Great Ninja War, but there's no mistaking those silver eyes.

Danzo's arm is covered with *Sharingan*. And there's only place he could have gotten them, only one source--

These are stolen eyes, plucked from the heads of Uchiha clan members.

"This--these are..." Hiruzen says, but his voice trails off as a wave of nausea sweeps over him. He closes his eyes.

Where had they gone so far astray? When had Danzo fallen so far?

Why hadn't he pulled his friend back from the edge?

And it's time to face reality. It's time to acknowledge the truth. He's a *failure*. It's an acrid taste in his mouth, a bitter pang in his chest, and Hiruzen is *ashamed*. He can still hear the second Hokage's voice, telling him to take good care of the Leaf, and he can't--

This wasn't how things were meant to go. He never wanted this. All he ever wanted was to protect the people and the village he loved. Now the village teeters on the verge of civil war, and it's his fault. He's a fool.

"Lord Hokage?" Shikaku says, and Hiruzen blinks with surprise. He'd forgotten he wasn't alone.

"Go to Fugaku Uchiha. Tell him to meet me here," he says to Shikaku, watching as the other man's eyes widen slightly.

"What are you going to do?" Shikaku asks, already walking towards the door. Hiruzen leans back in his chair, shaking his head.

“Something I should have done a long time ago,” he says softly.

Jiraiya hasn't been here in *years*. The last time he'd set foot in Hokage Tower had been a lifetime ago, when its occupant had been a radiant man with cerulean eyes and golden hair. He sighs. He's faced a lot of loss over the years. He's had a lot of bad days. But the day he heard of Minato Namikaze's death has to be one of the worst memories he has.

The door opens to reveal a familiar office, and for the first time in years, Jiraiya looks upon the weathered face of his old teacher.

“Jiraiya?” the Hokage says, looking up from his desk. He's thinner than Jiraiya remembers, frailer, but now there's a faint smile stretching over his face. “When did you get here?”

“A couple days ago, Lord Hokage,” Jiraiya replies, shifting uncomfortably as he looks down at the floor. He hears a faint chuckle, and glances up to see the Hokage's raised eyebrow.

“That's a bit formal, isn't it?” he asks Jiraiya, confused. “I can't remember the last time you called me that.”

“I wasn't sure you'd want to see me. Not after how I left,” he says, watching his old teacher carefully. The Hokage looks away from him, his gaze landing on a picture of a smiling blond man on the far wall.

“I think we all dealt with his death in different ways, Jiraiya. I won't hold that against you,” he says after a while.

Jiraiya lets out a breath, nodding slowly. As he steps further into the office, his eyes linger on the papers and pictures scattered over the surface of the Hokage's desk.

“I heard about Lord Danzo,” he says, and the Hokage lets out a weary sigh.

“I'm not going to ask how you know about that,” he says, running a hand over his face. “But yes. It's a mess.”

“I'm sorry, Sarutobi-sensei,” Jiraiya says gently. “I didn't care much for him, but he was your friend.”

“Look at this,” the Hokage says, holding out a sheaf of photographs. Jiraiya scans them quickly, his jaw going slack.

“Are these--”

“Yes,” the Hokage says. “Sharingan.”

“How did he get so *many*? How many Uchiha did he have to kill for--”

“There’s no way to know.”

“They’re going to want blood for this,” Jiraiya says, setting down the pictures. “Things are going to spiral out of control once this gets out.”

“And if they do,” the Hokage says, “the only person to blame is myself. I was blind, and I was a fool.”

“You trusted someone, and they deceived you,” Jiraiya says with a frown. “That doesn’t make you a fool. It makes you human.”

“I doubt Fugaku will see it that way, Jiraiya,” his old teacher says, giving him a tired smile. “But I do appreciate you saying so.”

Four hours later, Fugaku Uchiha walks into Hiruzen’s office. He stands in the middle of the room, ramrod-straight, tension evident in the hard lines of his face.

There was a time when Fugaku wouldn’t hold himself this way. There was a time when the laugh lines on his face outnumbered the frown lines on his brow. But that was a long time ago.

“Lord Hokage,” he says stiffly. “You called for me.”

There’s six feet between Hiruzen and the Uchiha clan head, but it might as well be a thousand miles. There’s hostility and suspicion in the air, a tangible, stifling weight. Hiruzen meets Fugaku’s arctic glare with a gentle smile, motioning for the other man to sit.

Fugaku doesn’t move, and he suppresses a sigh.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the news about Councilman Danzo by now,” Hiruzen says. Fugaku nods once.

“Shisui and Itachi Uchiha are alive and well. They’re being brought back to the village as we speak,” Hiruzen continues. “But there is something in the report from the scout team that we need to discuss.”

Fugaku steps closer, taking the folder Hiruzen offers him. It’s the

second time Hiruzen is watching someone flip through the report, the second time he's seeing their reaction firsthand. But where Jiraiya's reaction had been one of horrified surprise, Fugaku's face tightens with *rage*. His shoulders tense up, and his cool hostility is replaced with tempestuous anger. The folder's tossed back onto the desk as he brandishes a photograph.

"This is--*what is the meaning of this?*?" he snarls. Hiruzen braves the waves of fury radiating off the other man, meeting his volcanic glower with a sympathetic countenance.

"Sit down, Fugaku," he says.

"I--what's going--"

"*Sit down.*"

There may be an ocean of resentment between the two men, there may be years of frustration and little love lost between the two of them, but--

But Hiruzen is still the *Hokage*. He's still the most respected person in the whole village. And clearly, that still means *something* to the Uchiha clan head, because Fugaku drops into the chair on the other side of the desk without another word.

Hiruzen studies the younger man for what seems like an eternity. Fugaku's silky black hair is a little disheveled, his brow is a little furrowed, and his eyes are locked on Hiruzen's with blazing intensity.

He remembers a time when they had been comrades. He remembers Fugaku as he once was, a fiercely loyal young man with a trademark, lopsided smirk. He remembers hard-fought victories and crushing defeats, fighting side-by-side with a man he'd considered a friend. That camaraderie is dead now, living only in his memories, and Fugaku's friendly smile and witty banter has been lost to the dusty annals of time.

"*You've got to keep up, Lord Hokage!*"

And Hiruzen asks himself the same question again--

Where had everything gone wrong?

He's lived a long, long life. There are joyful memories--marrying the love of his life, cradling his newborn son, watching armies of Leaf

ninja returning home at the end of the Third War. There are bitter recollections, too--when Orochimaru had forsaken the village, and that dark day he'd lost his wife, and the village had lost its Hokage. There's love and loss, ecstasy and grief, gratitude and regret.

There's a lot to regret.

Because he's failed as a father, his son refusing to even see him anymore. He's failed as a teacher, with Orochimaru growing wicked and twisted, and Tsunade fleeing the village. He'd thought that maybe he had succeeded as a leader, guiding the village through two world wars, but--

But the man sitting before him is proof enough that he's failed there too. So Hiruzen sighs, leaning back in his chair, and breaks the silence.

"I'm sorry, Fugaku."

It hangs in the air for a second, a declaration that shocks the Uchiha clan head into silence. He opens his mouth, as if to say something, but nothing comes out. Hiruzen shakes his head sadly.

"I wasn't made to do this," he says to Fugaku. "I'm not a diplomat or a politician. I've never been those things. All I've ever been is a soldier, and everything I've ever done I did because I thought it would protect the village."

Fugaku's scowl mellows slightly, and he looks away as Hiruzen keeps speaking.

"I left the espionage and side dealings to Danzo. He was always so much better with those things," he says, his voice soft and laden with sorrow. "Now I see I neglected my duties. He took advantage of my trust and abused his power. And I'm sorry, Fugaku, I really am. I failed you, your clan, and the entire village."

"But Danzo isn't the only one who's taken advantage of my mistakes. He's not the only one who's keeping dangerous secrets. So let's put it all on the table. There are no more secrets between us, not now," Hiruzen says, staring into Fugaku's wary expression. "I know about the coup, Fugaku."

And there it is. These are words he can't take back, hanging in the air like smoke. They're words that wipe the emotion from Fugaku's face, leaving an inscrutable mask behind. The younger man slouches in his

chair, something flickering in his eyes.

“What do you plan to do?” Fugaku asks, his voice quiet and barely audible.

“I’ve known you since you were a boy, you know. I remember you playing in the Academy playground with my son like it was yesterday,” Hiruzen says. “And for the life of me, I can’t--why didn’t you just come to me? What made you think you couldn’t just come to me?”

Fugaku’s gaze drops now, a darkness falling over his face as he grits his teeth. When he speaks, his words tremble with boiling frustration and incandescent anger.

“And what have you done?” he spits venomously. “You’ve seen what’s happening--how they corral us into our district, how they scorn and exclude us. I don’t need to remind you of *that*. We were a founding clan of Konoha, and now--now we beg for a seat at the table--”

“We can change that,” Hiruzen cuts in. “Things can *change*, but--”

“Nothing changes! Nothing changes in this *fucking* village!” Fugaku snaps. “My brother, my sister, my father, they all died in the war. And what? What did they die for, *Lord Hokage*? For the Uchiha to be exiled--”

“You still haven’t told me why you didn’t just come to me,” Hiruzen says, unintimidated by the other man’s outburst. “There’s nothing that you’ve mentioned that we can’t change, together.”

“It’s insulting. It’s humiliating. It wouldn’t have happened in the first place if the Uchiha were in charge,” Fugaku says, and Hiruzen sighs.

“So this is about pride, then?” he asks. Fugaku’s eyes flit up to look at him, but the Uchiha doesn’t answer. Hiruzen stands, turning and leaning on the windowsill behind him as he looks out over the village.

“What use is pride to dead men?” Hiruzen says.

These words join the rest, floating around in the air until the office is stifling, suffocating with the invisible tension stewing between the two men. And then the dam breaks, the floodwaters surge free, and there’s the screech of Fugaku’s chair sliding backwards and the clatter of it crashing to the ground.

Fugaku's eyes glow with scarlet light, the black pinwheels of his Mangekyou Sharingan spinning. There's a thrumming noise as *power* crackles out from him, and four silent ANBU appear out of thin air to surround him, swords drawn. It happens in an instant; Fugaku looks to his left, and then to his right, and all four ANBU crumple, unconscious. Hiruzen turns and watches calmly as Fugaku turns his crimson gaze upon him, his face twisting into a contemptuous sneer.

"You think this is about *pride*?" he grinds out, each word dripping with outrage. "We're pariahs, prisoners in our own village. We're *animals*, hunted for our eyes. And if we resist, if we try to fight back--you'll kill all of us?"

"You do know how this ends, don't you?" Hiruzen says softly, hands still on the windowsill. "Either we find some common ground, or I fulfill my oath to protect the village."

Fugaku grabs the folder off the table and hurls it into the air, sending forms and photos flying. His eyes glow even brighter, and the room grows unbearably hot, as if it's about to burst into flames.

"And what about your oath to protect *us*?" he snarls. "You know how Danzo got these Sharingan, don't you? Where were you when *we* needed you? What did *you* do?"

Hiruzen sighs, stepping away from the window to meet Fugaku's luminous eyes. The younger man's knuckles are pale, squeezing the edge of Hiruzen's desk, and his dark hair falls over his face haphazardly.

"That's why we're speaking now," Hiruzen says. "We can dissolve the restrictions. The Uchiha district can be abolished, the clan can be integrated back into the village. We can leave all of this behind us."

"*Leave it all behind us*?" Fugaku says, hysterical incredulity seeping into his voice. He grabs the picture of one of Danzo's stolen Sharingan from the desk, shoving it in Hiruzen's face. "You want us to *forget* about this?"

"I can't change the past, Fugaku," Hiruzen says, finally letting a little frustration bleed through his composed facade. "I can't--all we can do is make sure this doesn't happen again. I promise you, I won't let it happen again."

Fugaku's expression grows guarded. But his eyes are as expressive as ever, black pinwheels spinning wildly as he glares at him. A dozen

different emotions swirl around in those eyes, reminding Hiruzen of the glowers he used to receive from a teenaged Fugaku.

And Hiruzen feels a sense of finality, because even if he's failed at a thousand things as Hokage, he refuses to fail in *this*. He's not going to lose Fugaku to this.

"I won't let anything bad happen again," he repeats, and Fugaku snorts.

"What happens when you change your mind?" the clan head asks him, rousing him from his reverie. "What happens if your successor doesn't share your sentiments?"

"That's a good point," Hiruzen concedes. "But you won't have to worry about me changing my mind. I won't be Hokage for very much longer. I've chosen a successor today."

Fugaku manages to look both furious *and* unimpressed at the same time, his shoulders still tense and his fists still clenched as he whirls away, pacing in the middle of the office like a caged beast.

"That doesn't answer *anything*--"

"I'm saying," Hiruzen cuts in sharply, "that you're right. The Uchiha deserve a greater role in running the village. That's the only way to truly bridge this divide."

Fugaku laughs scornfully, facing away from Hiruzen. The harsh sound splits the still air of the office.

"So you'll turn over the control of the village?" he asks.

"To be Hokage requires putting the village over everything else, even yourself and the people you love," Hiruzen says deliberately. "It means being willing to sacrifice everything for the greater good. There's a young man who's shown himself capable of doing that."

Fugaku stops pacing, turning to face Hiruzen slowly. He's frowning, shaking his head, but Hiruzen goes on.

"This young man warned the Council of a plot against the village, even though it meant betraying his family and clan. He spied for us, turning against the people he loved," Hiruzen says, watching Fugaku carefully. "He bore tremendous personal hardship to uphold his oath to the village."

Fugaku's muscles bunch and tense as he freezes, staring down Hiruzen. He shakes his head again, as if he doesn't want to hear what Hiruzen's saying to him. But he stands there and listens, and Hiruzen stands there and speaks.

"Itachi Uchiha proved his commitment to the village over everything else. He will succeed me as Hokage."

The color drains from Fugaku's face, and red turns to brown as his Sharingan fades away. He's stepping back, recoiling as if Hiruzen's struck him. Wide-eyed and speechless, Fugaku viciously shakes his head a third time. After a long moment, he finally stammers something out, his voice rough and low.

"No. No, that's--not Itachi. Itachi wouldn't, he *wouldn't* do that," he says. Hiruzen raises an eyebrow at him.

"There are no secrets between us anymore, Fugaku. Everything I tell you is the truth," he says, reaching out to steady the younger man with one hand. But Fugaku flinches, staggering back, almost tripping over the bodies of the incapacitated ANBU behind him.

"Itachi," Fugaku says, quietly, taking in a deep breath. Something *changes*, his crackling rage giving way to--

Giving way to anguish.

Hiruzen watches Fugaku bury his face in his hands, sitting atop the overturned chair he'd tossed to the ground just minutes earlier. His shoulders slump, and the heat in the room falls away as Fugaku's anger fizzles out.

"My own *son*," he says hoarsely, looking up. "My heir and my son. You used him against me?"

"He came to us, Fugaku. I didn't turn your son against you," Hiruzen replies. He meant it to be a reassurance, a way to tell Fugaku that he's never tried to undermine him, but--

But Fugaku looks as though he's been slapped. His eyes grow unfocused, staring at the floor, and when he speaks again, he sounds hollow. Empty.

"Itachi was my--Itachi was everything. He was always meant to be the best of us," he says, and Hiruzen winces internally at how *broken* he sounds.

“He acted out of love. You should be proud of him,” he says, looking down at the younger man. But Fugaku’s shaking his head again.

“How can I ever look him in the face again?” he says, his voice clouded and thick. The words drop from his mouth like boulders, heavy and dead. “You let Danzo hunt us for sport, you drove us into exile, you let the village hate us. Did you have to take my son from me too?”

“I don’t want to take anything from you,” Hiruzen says. “I want us to work together--”

“You think he’s worthy of being Hokage because he betrayed us,” Fugaku mumbles. “That’s what you value.”

“I’ve told you what I want to do,” Hiruzen replies. “Will you work with me?”

The dark-haired man looks dazed, dazed and defeated, as he gets to his feet. He won’t meet Hiruzen’s gaze, he’s breathing rapidly, and there’s despair written into every line of his body. His eyes flick up to Hiruzen’s face momentarily.

“You’ve taken everything already,” he says softly. “What choice do I have left?”

Chapter End Notes

even though i might not respond to all the comments, i just want everyone to know i read every comment as it comes in and i appreciate them all so much! replying to comments just makes me anxious sometimes, i don't want y'all to think i'm ignoring you

i'm sorry for the long, political chapter LOL (but not really)

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In the Village Hidden in the Leaves

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Rough sheets sliding against his skin, a papery gown that does *nothing* to keep him warm, the caustic tang of antiseptic burning his nose--

Even before he opens his eyes, Kakashi *knows* he's in a hospital. He suppresses a groan as he sits up, rubbing his face with his hands and squinting. The harsh white hospital lights don't help his headache at all, a dull ache building at the base of his skull.

"You look like shit."

Kakashi glances over to catch Tenzo grinning at him. He's sitting on the floor by the far side of the room, flipping through something, his hospital gown doing a poor job of preserving his modesty.

"I--" Kakashi shakes his head, and then *quickly* regrets it as pain throbs behind his eyes and he grows dizzy. "What the fuck happened?"

"They gave me this report," Tenzo says, standing up and tossing a beige folder to him. "Apparently, a jounin patrol found our whole team incapacitated, and Lord Danzo dead."

"What?" Kakashi says, eyes wide. "There's no way. I--I would remember that. All I remember is travelling through that forest."

"I don't remember anything either," Tenzo says. "The field medic report in there says we were all under a genjutsu when they found us."

Kakashi closes his eyes, straining to remember *something*. His mind's a little fuzzy and he's having trouble concentrating, normal symptoms for someone coming out of a strong genjutsu. He sighs, opening his eyes slowly and staring up at the ceiling.

"Are Shisui and Itachi alright?" he asks, examining a brown-colored stain stretching over part of the ceiling. Tenzo snorts with amusement, leaning against the wall.

"They're fine. Well, as fine as Shisui ever gets," he says. "They're still out cold, but they're probably waking up now."

“How are you awake?” Kakashi asks, narrowing his eyes. “You woke up before any of us did.”

“Well,” Tenzo says, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “As the most powerful member of Team Ro, it makes sense. I think--”

“Ok, shut up,” Kakashi mumbles, covering his face with his hands. “You’re full of shit and you’re making my head hurt.”

“I liked you better when you were unconscious,” Tenzo grumbles, returning to his spot on the floor. Kakashi groans as Tenzo’s gown rides up his legs again.

“Tenzo!” he yells. “Put on some *fucking* underwear!”

Itachi’s head always hurts when he uses his Sharingan. It’s some sort of strain-related migraine, that’s what the medics he went to always told him. An unfortunate side-effect of his undisputed mastery.

But the pounding in his head is much more intense than usual, and he can’t help but grimace and groan, covering his eyes with the back of one hand.

“Big brother?”

It’s a gentle voice, soft with concern and unbridled affection. Despite the ache at the base of his skull and the painful dryness of his mouth, Itachi’s mouth quirks up into a small smile as he opens his eyes and looks at his little brother.

“Hey, Sasuke,” he says, his voice gravelly. The five-year-old’s eyes go even wider than they were before, a blinding grin flashing over that eager face as Sasuke crawls onto the bed and lands on top of him. Itachi can’t help but chuckle as tiny arms wrap around his chest in a vigorous hug.

“Sasuke! Let your brother breathe,” his mother says, pulling the boy off him. “How do you feel, Itachi?”

She’s smiling at him, holding a squirming and *very* unhappy Sasuke back from his big brother. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see his father standing by the window, and he relaxes just a bit. It may just be an impersonal hospital room, but it’s Konoha. It’s home. This is *safe*.

“Just a little headache, but I’m fine,” he admits. “What--how am I here? I was on a mission--”

“Mikoto,” his father says quietly, turning to face his wife. “Can you take Sasuke to go see if Shisui is awake too?”

His father stands on the far side of the room, his back to the three of them, staring out the window. His voice is normally prideful, full, rich. And now it’s not, it’s tired and distant and shaky, and Itachi’s never heard him sound so...

Dead.

“Can’t I stay with Itachi?” Sasuke says, pouting fiercely, too young to pick up that something’s wrong, and his mother laughs softly. Now Itachi can see that her smiles are forced, not quite reaching her eyes.

“Sasuke! You’ll hurt Shisui’s feelings. Come on,” she says, tugging gently. Sasuke whines all the way to the door, all pleading eyes and chubby cheeks. Then the door swings shut.

His father’s still standing in the same spot, silhouetted against the window by golden sunlight, and Itachi opens his mouth to say something, to ask what’s wrong--

“Your ANBU team was incapacitated and put under some form of genjutsu. Councilman Danzo has been killed,” his father says. Itachi’s eyes widen, and the sheets rustle as he sits up abruptly.

“Is Shisui okay?” he blurts out, his chest tightening suddenly.

“He’s fine,” comes the clipped reply. Itachi slumps back against the pillows, but there’s still an anxious churning in his stomach. Sure, his father can be demanding and strict, but he’s never like *this*. He won’t even *look* at Itachi.

“I--I’m sorry, father,” Itachi mumbles. “I know you’re probably disappointed at the failure of my mission. I’ll train harder--”

“Itachi,” his father interrupts. His voice is different now, a little softer, and a little more gentle. “I’m not--I don’t care about your mission. I’m glad you came back safe.”

“What’s wrong, then?” Itachi says, his eyes fixed on the Uchiha clan crest emblazoned on the back of his father’s shirt.

"I called off the coup earlier today," his father says bluntly, hands clasped behind his back. Itachi grows very still, a half-dozen thoughts crashing through his tired brain.

"What do you mean?" Itachi says, startled. He couldn't have heard that right, there's *no way*--

"The Hokage and I came to an agreement," his father says. "The coup will be abandoned, and the restrictions on our clan lifted. And you will become Hokage. You've already been discharged from ANBU."

Itachi wonders if he's still caught in a genjutsu, or if he's dreaming.

"I can't become Hokage," he says, shaking his head. "I'm too young, and entirely inexperienced--"

"You're seventeen years old, Itachi. You're not a child," his father says, cutting him off. "And you won't become Hokage right away. You'll train under Lord Third for a couple years and learn everything you need."

"You're just... abandoning the coup?" Itachi asks hesitantly. His father sighs.

"The situation changed. It wouldn't have worked out as we intended. Besides, the Hokage's solution puts an Uchiha in charge."

There's hope, fragile hope, building in his chest and climbing up his throat, and he bites his tongue to keep himself from laughing. This is *absurd*--

But there's something strange in his father's voice, something *off*. He can't help feeling that the older man is trying to convince himself of his own words.

"Why me?" he asks. "There's plenty of people more qualified than a teenager to serve as Hokage. Why does the Hokage want me?"

"Lord Third wanted his successor to place the good of the village over any personal ties," his father says. His voice is cold and heavy, leaden and dull. "He said the fact that you spied on our clan for the Council proved that you were willing to sacrifice anything, even your family, for the sake of the village."

His father finally turns around, and Itachi wishes he could melt through the floor. The older man's face is crushed, hopeless, and

above all, *hurt*. His dark eyes look into Itachi's, and there's no anger or betrayal there. There's only pain.

And the happiness that threatened to burst out from Itachi's chest just moments before burns up, consumed by black flames and leaving the taste of ash in his mouth. He's numb, he's shaking, and now he just wants to look *anywhere* but into his father's face.

His father draws near and stands by the side of his bed, his fingers brushing over Itachi's cheek in a tender caress. Itachi studies the far wall, neither willing nor able to meet his father's eyes.

"I don't lie to myself. I know I was never the father you deserved," he says to him, his fingers ruffling Itachi's hair. "But since the very first moment I held you in my arms, you've been my whole world, Itachi. Everything I ever did was to make sure that you'd live in a world that was better than the one I lived in."

Itachi takes a deep breath, letting it out as he stares at his father's shirt. It's the easy way out, the cowardly way out, but he just doesn't know what would happen if he looked into the man's face instead.

"I don't know how I lost you," his father murmurs, letting his hand fall to his side, and Itachi feels the absence acutely. There's a long pause, populated only by shaky breaths and fleeting glances and the crushing weight in the air of two people who don't know what to say to one another.

"Do you hate me?" Itachi asks eventually, breaking the silence. He doesn't know what to say, or how to act, but he just--he needs to know. He's looking at his father fall apart, and it's his fault, and maybe it's selfish but *he needs to know--*

"No," his father says sharply, jolting Itachi back into the moment. "No. Gods, Itachi, I... I could never hate you. You could do anything, and I'd still love you. I love you."

Relief washes over him, so intense that Itachi feels his eyes sting and grow wet. His fists clench in the bedsheets, pale skin against white sheets, and he lets his gaze slide back up to his father's face. He sees a stricken, dazed man staring back at him, dark eyes overflowing with desperate affection.

Itachi knows he has the same expression plastered over his own features. His father swallows once, and then speaks again.

“I just need to know, Itachi. If they had asked you to take up arms against the clan, would you have...” His father’s voice, choked and wounded, trails off for a moment. “Would you have done it? Would you have done that for the village?”

Itachi’s a warrior. He’s a soldier, an assassin by the age of eleven. He’s killed more people than he can count, told more lies than he can keep straight, and endured far more suffering than anyone his age ought to have endured. All of this is true, and yet--

And yet, when it comes to it, Itachi Uchiha can’t look his father in the face and lie to him.

So Itachi says nothing, staring back listlessly and watching his father’s heart shatter in real time. His father takes a step away from Itachi, shoulders slumping and his eyes widening, and then he looks away.

“I see.”

He walks towards the door, quickly, as if he’s anxious to put distance between himself and his son. Itachi wants to say *something*, wants to stop him from leaving. But he can’t think straight, his limbs won’t move, and all the words he wants to say, that he *should* say, tangle in his mouth.

He watches his father push the door open, standing in the threshold and casting one last look back at his son. His eyes shine with unshed tears, and Itachi realizes that he’s never seen his father cry. Until this moment, right here.

“You’ll make a great Hokage one day, Itachi. Congratulations,” he says. Then the door swings shut with a click, and Itachi stares blankly into the dying rays of the setting sun.

Chapter End Notes

just a reminder that shisui and itachi are aged up in this AU, so they’re both 17-18ish at this point

THIS FIC IS NOW TITLED "KEEPING UP WITH THE UCHIHAS" because the plot has taken on a life of its own, and I'm not sorry

beta'ed by the insanely talented outstorn, who stayed up until 3am editing this monstrosity with me

twitter: [@baja_heaux](#)

Wandering the Streets

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's not the most *ethical* application of the Rinnegan's powers.

Sasuke knows this. But there wasn't any use for money after Kaguya destroyed the world, and he's broke as shit and *starving*.

He's been using the Rinnegan to knock strangers out, and then picking their pockets. Sasuke sighs, considering the bulging coin-purse between his fingers. There's something rumbling in his stomach that *almost* feels like guilt. Or maybe it's hunger. He's not quite sure.

If he really thinks about it, being a petty thief is a step up from being an international terrorist. So at least there's that.

From the corner of his eye, he catches the tell-tale flicker of an ANBU running over rooftops overhead, and he drifts a little further into the shadows. It's a habit to suppress his chakra signature at this point, to blend into the inky darkness lining the very edges of busy streets as a vibrant orange-and-pink sunset sets the western skies alight. It's a habit borne from spending five years on the run from Kaguya; Sasuke's all but invisible now, free to drift through the village.

He lets his feet wander of their own accord, the balmy air ruffling his hair and tugging at the hem of his cloak. The roar of a thousand cicadas, hidden in the many trees lining the boulevards, merges with the melody of birdsong. Under the soles of his sandals, the cobblestones radiate stored heat, a pleasant warmth.

Sasuke's used to bitter cold and chilling silence, the only sound in the air being the tramping march of White Zetsu. Now he's surrounded by *life*, and he's struggling to take it all in at once. He's wearing an eyepatch over his Rinnegan again, but his other eye roams over everything, greedily drinking in the sights of humanity.

Here's a baker, closing up his shop. There's a young boy in the street--his son?--tossing scraps of bread onto the road and laughing with delight as several birds dart down to snatch up the crumbs.

Here's a young couple, walking hand-in-hand, the woman throwing her head back to laugh at some joke the man beside her just told. The

glimmer in their eyes matches the glorious sunset in its luster.

And here's a familiar ramen shop, small and unassuming, tucked between two staid buildings. A delicious aroma wafts out into the street, making his mouth water, and he draws nearer. There's a boy standing by the shop, golden hair glinting in the fading light.

Sasuke freezes up.

Itachi would read to him when he was just a little kid. Sasuke remembers begging his brother to read him stories about the first Hokage, the fearsome Hashirama Senju, or to tell him about the exploits of Konoha's famed Yellow Flash during the Third Great War. These were the stories he adored as a child; legends of great warriors who changed the world.

But Sasuke is a great warrior now, too. He's changed the world. It's not all it's cracked up to be. He's been there, watching as the people he loves are taken from him. All that power, all that might, all the *notoriety*--

What does it matter, if it doesn't change anything?

He's ripped out his own hair and asked himself this, crying tears of blood and shaking with impotent fury. He's screamed until his voice grew hoarse, howling up at the sky as if the clouds would part and answer him. And the answer is always the same--these things don't matter.

Now Sasuke doesn't yearn for tales of glory and gore, for tales of great warriors and epic battles.

He cherishes the mundane. He remembers trying to catch fireflies in the field bordering the Uchiha district, his mother laughing at his antics. He remembers Itachi teaching him how to crack an egg in the kitchen of their family home one lazy Saturday morning. He remembers watching Naruto inhale old ration bars they'd scavenged from the ruins of Iwagakure.

In the short, miserable life of Sasuke Uchiha, these are the moments where he's been truly *happy*.

He wishes he'd gone through life with his Sharingan permanently activated, so he could indelibly etch each and every banal moment into his mind forever. He wishes he'd spent his life writing all these memories down, because hazy recollection is all he has left now.

The wind picks up, and Sasuke shakes himself out of his fugue. He's still staring at that blond head of hair, unable to so much as *move*. And all he can think about--

There's an old story that only lives in Sasuke's memories. It's a tale of a future that will, hopefully, never come to pass. It's a story of an older brother who sacrificed everything he loved to save his sibling. It's the story of a golden-haired boy that pulled his best friend back from the edge of the abyss. It's a story that ends with the moon turning blood-red, and the love of Sasuke's life bleeding out in the snow.

But this, *this right here*--

This could be a new story. It could be a story that doesn't end in ruin, doesn't end in death. And nothing will ever bring back the people that he loved. He knows this, just as he knows that nothing will erase the pain of watching them die, either.

But that old story, with all its breathless highs and crushing lows, is over now. All he can do is move forward, and maybe do things *right* this time.

He's been given another chance. He's been given another chance, and he can either spend it mourning and moping, or he could make *new* memories.

So Sasuke walks up to the entrance of Ichiraku Ramen, casting a sidelong glance at the boy in the ratty orange shirt standing next to him. The kid's got an old frog wallet clutched in his hands, mournfully looking at the few coins inside.

"Hey," Sasuke says, his voice cracking. "I'm Juugo. What's your name?"

Familiar blue eyes gaze up at his face, eyes that blaze with naivety and sincerity and boundless optimism, eyes that make Sasuke's heart pound because he *knows* them.

"I'm Naruto Uzumaki," the boy declares, pointing at himself with his thumb. The world grows several degrees brighter as a radiant smile spreads over that little face, and Sasuke can't look away. And he knows what's happening here is unstoppable, is fucking *cosmic* in scale--

"Wanna get dinner? My treat," he says to a five-year-old Naruto.

“No take-backs!” the boy yells, grabbing the sleeve of his cloak and dragging him forward into the light. But he doesn’t need to say that, because Sasuke wouldn’t take this back for anything.

He’s home.

Chapter End Notes

thank you again for the sweet comments <3

beta'd, as usual, by the insanely talented outstorm

twitter: [@baja_heaux](https://twitter.com/baja_heaux)

Who We Love

Chapter Notes

beta'd by the AMAZING outstorm

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“But like, in a couple years I’ll be at the Academy, and then--” Naruto pauses to shove ramen into his mouth, his little cheeks bulging and rivulets of broth running down his chin. His eyes are wide and expressive--Naruto had *never* been able to hide his emotions--and Sasuke’s breathless just from looking into them.

“Thank you thank you-thank-you!” Naruto exclaims, his words tumbling over one another as he pulls the bowl of ramen towards him. “You’re the best sensei ever!”

“Three bowls, maximum,” Kakashi says firmly, his voice soft with amusement. “I’m not made of money.”

Sasuke doubts that Naruto’s even heard their teacher, because the blond’s stuffing his face with indecent enthusiasm. He can’t help staring in horrified fascination, and Naruto notices.

“S’ke,” he mumbles, his cheeks bulging out and his voice muffled as he talks around the food in his mouth. “R’nt you gonna eat?”

“Quit talking with your mouth full, idiot,” Sasuke mutters back, hating the way the tips of his ears turn pink as Naruto giggles beside him.

“Juugo?”

“Huh?” Sasuke says, startled out of his musings. Naruto’s holding the now-empty bowl, glancing up at him with a hopeful expression plastered over his tiny face.

“Can I have more?” Naruto repeats, a little frown of hesitation tugging at his brow. Sasuke almost misses what he says *again*, because he’s so hypnotized by the familiar mannerisms. Every time this boy smiles, Sasuke’s mind goes blank. Every time he scratches the back of his head with one hand, Sasuke’s hand clenches tighter around the glass of water. Every frown, the way Naruto holds his head, the lilt of his voice, it’s--

It's so--

It's so fucking *painful*.

He's fucked. He's completely, utterly, irreversibly fucked. Sasuke's having trouble finding his voice, having trouble responding, because he's still trying to wrap his head around just how *fucked* he is.

"You can have however many bowls you want," Sasuke manages to force out eventually, his voice barely more than a croak. The boy pumps a fist into the air with a delighted cry, and the ramen vendor--Sasuke forgets his name--sets another bowl down.

Now it's been ten minutes, and Naruto's on his *third* bowl, and there's a healthy glow suffusing the boy's cheeks as he chatters incessantly. And Sasuke can't stop smiling like an idiot, can't help being *mesmerized*--

--won't let me yet. But I don't care. I'm going to be Hokage one day," the boy says, slurping down another mouthful. "They'll all respect me one day, just you wait!"

Sasuke remembers hundreds of Leaf ninja marching towards the final battle against Madara, remembers the universal looks of admiration and adulation directed at Naruto.

"I don't doubt it," is all he says.

"Say, you're a ninja, right?" Naruto chirps, examining the silvery scars on the underside of Sasuke's exposed wrist. Sasuke tugs his sleeve down as he slides his arm into his lap, looking over warily.

"I was," he says slowly. "But that was a long time ago."

The stool next to him almost falls over as Naruto springs to his feet, *yanking* on Sasuke's arm. Sasuke stares at the ecstatic boy with wide eyes, startled.

"You could teach me!" he exclaims, beaming.

"What?" Sasuke says, bewildered. "Teach you?"

"I'm not old enough to enroll at the Academy yet, 'nd I'm not from a clan, so I don't have anyone to teach me how to use chakra--"

"Chakra," Sasuke corrects him, rubbing his forehead. He can't--he *can't* just say no, not when there's a radiant ball of sunshine grinning

at him like a madman. But training Naruto in the middle of the Leaf village isn't exactly keeping with the low-profile he'd planned.

"Please?" Naruto says. It's the slight quiver of the boy's lower lip that finally breaks Sasuke, and he sighs.

"Alright," he says, trying not to chuckle as small arms wrap themselves around his ribs. "Finish your dinner, and we can start tomorrow."

"Okay!" Naruto giggles, scrambling back onto the stool that's a little too tall for him and pulling his ramen closer to the edge of the counter. "Aren't you gonna eat too?"

Considering that his stomach's doing somersaults and his heart's fluttering like crazy, Sasuke is *perfectly* content to avoid eating anything. He leans forward, tapping Naruto's forehead with his index finger.

"Quit talking with your mouth full," he says, not even trying to hide the fondness softening his voice.

Shisui's *fine*.

He just wants to go home, blast himself with hot water and get rid of the smell of disinfectant that clings to his skin, and sleep in his own damn bed. The medic-nin, however, had given him a thoroughly unimpressed look as she'd pushed him back into the hospital bed. She'd informed him, rather brusquely, that all the members of Team Ro were to stay in the hospital overnight, for observation. Shisui had sputtered at her rude tone, asking where her bedside manner had gone.

She'd rolled her eyes at him and left.

But now Shisui's fine, *more* than fine, because he's sneaking out of his room to visit Itachi, and this is *exciting*. It's night time now, and the hospital's quiet except for the night staff and the scattered handful of guards patrolling the hallways. Shisui pushes open the door of his room, drifting soundlessly down the hall. He winces as he moves, his body still a little sore from *whatever* had happened out there in the woods.

He can feel Itachi's chakra, subdued and hazy, behind one of the doors

lining the hall, and he slips in. Itachi's room faces a different direction than his, and the light of the full moon pours into the room. Shisui blinks a couple times, letting his eyes adjust.

"Hey Tachi," he says. Itachi's facing away from him, his back to the door, and he doesn't move. Shisui grabs him by the shoulder, a playful smile on his face, and tugs. "C'mon, wake up, I'm bored--"

"Not now, Shisui," Itachi says, his voice muffled by the pillow. "Go away."

"Itachi..." Shisui whines, plopping down on the edge of the bed and ruffling through Itachi's hair. Blunt fingernails drag along Itachi's scalp, and he turns and grabs Shisui's wrist with one hand.

"Shisui," he says, his voice soft and tired. "Enough."

Now that Itachi's flipped onto his back, Shisui can see the other boy's red-rimmed eyes and downturned mouth. His own smile fades as he withdraws his hand, eyes widening in concern.

"What's wrong? What happened?" he asks, searching Itachi's puffy face. All he receives in response is a silent stare, brimming with thinly-veiled misery, and he sighs.

"Itachi," Shisui murmurs, pulling one leg up onto the bed and slouching closer to his best friend. "Tell me what happened."

The other boy lets out a shuddering breath, looking up at the ceiling. Itachi's never been expressive or outgoing, but Shisui *knows* his friend, knows every mannerism. Itachi looks *resigned*, crushed, some unknown burden furrowing his brow and sending a pang through Shisui's chest.

His arm is pressed against the warmth of Itachi's side, and Itachi's still holding him by the wrist, and the two of them are just looking into each other's eyes until the other boy swallows eventually.

"Father called off the coup today," he says slowly, letting Shisui's hand slip out from between his fingers. Shisui takes a sharp breath, sitting up abruptly.

"What? Itachi, that's--that's amazing--"

"He knows." Itachi cuts him off, his voice flat as he closes his eyes. "He knows what we did, Shisui. He knows *everything*--"

Itachi's voice cracks at the end, and he's scrunching his nose and screwing his eyes shut, trying and failing to stay calm, and Shisui instinctively presses his palm against the other boy's chest.

"Hey," he says, smothering his own anxiety and pushing against Itachi. "Breathe."

"I--he..." Itachi stammers, breathless and ragged. "I *hurt* him, I did that..."

"Breathe, Itachi. What did he say?"

"He said the Hokage chose me as his successor," Itachi mumbles. His eyes are open again, unfocused and haunting. Shisui has questions, so *many* questions, but he lets the other boy speak.

"He told me that he knows about the spying, and he--he asked--"

Itachi takes another deep breath, steadying himself, his fingers curling against the hand Shisui's holding against his chest.

"Father asked me if I would have taken up arms against the clan. If the village had ordered it." Itachi's voice is a tortured whisper now, his body stiffening again. "And..."

"And?"

"I would have done it, Shisui. If it meant stopping a war--if it meant saving Sasuke, I would have done it," Itachi says gently, growing eerily still. "What kind of person does that make me?"

It's that question, hanging in the heavy air, that rings through Shisui's ears. He doesn't have an answer to it. And Itachi's always so strong, so composed, so confident, but now--

Now he just sounds broken, and Shisui can't *stand* it.

Itachi lets out a startled grunt as Shisui's arms wind around him, pulling him deep into a crushing embrace. For a long moment, Shisui holds his best friend in his arms, and the only sound he can hear is Itachi's slowing breaths and racing heartbeat.

"How can I face him? How can I go back to that? He's never going to look at me the same way, Shisui--"

"Itachi. You're a *good* person. I trust you with my life," Shisui says into Itachi's chest, the fabric of the boy's hospital gown tickling his nose.

“And I don’t know what’s gonna happen, and I don’t know how to fix it, but if you want, you can come stay with me and my mom once we get out of here. As long as you want.”

Then Shisui feels Itachi’s arms around him, hugging him back tightly, and he feels Itachi let out a strained breath against the top of his head.

“I didn’t want any of this,” he says sadly, stroking Shisui’s hair. “All I ever wanted was to protect the people I love.”

Shisui lifts his head, raising an eyebrow.

“You *did*. We did, ’Tachi. No matter what happens now, it’ll be *okay*. Trust me.”

“Can--” Itachi starts, sounding hesitant and nervous. “Can you stay here? Just for tonight?”

Shisui grins, rolling off Itachi and giving him a weak shove.

“ ’Course. But you gotta move over, or I’ll fall out of bed,” he says. Itachi gives him an innocent glance.

“That might cheer me up...”

“Shut *up* and move over!”

Chapter End Notes

SO as an interested side note, Fugaku doesn't actually know Shisui's been reporting back to the village/helping Itachi spy. Hiruzen only seems to have brought up Itachi's betrayal to explain his decision to Fugaku, but the way Fugaku broke this news to Itachi DOES make it seem like he knows everything.

So poor Itachi just assumed that Fugaku knows about Shisui's involvement, when this is not actually the case (yet).

twitter: [@baja_heaux](#)

New Roles

Chapter Notes

i got new roles i count 'em

this chapter was written while "25" by Adele was blasting in my ears

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Faint moonlight streams through dusty windows as a ghost creeps through Naruto Uzumaki's apartment. It's a figure shrouded in black, moving silently over the scuffed floor tiles towards the apartment's sole bedroom. There's the faintest creak from old hinges as the bedroom door slowly glides open.

The five-year-old boy within is sound asleep, body wrapped around a lumpy pillow and half-covered by a patchy blanket. Golden hair, the color of the evening sun in the summer skies, is visible even in the half-light, and the little boy's chest rises and falls as he snores gently, a few stray drops of drool on the orange bed sheets. The shadowed figure steps closer and closer until it's standing over the boy, looking down at the child for a long moment.

Naruto had once had ANBU guards when he was younger, but over time, the village had fewer and fewer resources to spare. Now, with the village on lockdown due to the recently abandoned coup and the assassination of a council member, there's no one left to guard Naruto as the shadowed figure reaches towards the boy's head with one slender, pale hand.

For a dozen seconds, there's complete stillness.

Then Sasuke turns on the lamp on the bedside table, flooding the room with bright yellow light. Naruto lets out an adorable little groan, his eyes flickering open and taking in the man standing over him.

Sasuke nearly jumps out of his skin as the boy lets out a blood-curdling scream and scoots away as fast as he can. There's a blur of motion as Sasuke lunges over the bed and grabs Naruto by the collar of his stained t-shirt before the panicked boy falls off the bed all together.

"Fuck--Naruto! It's just me!" he grumbles, pulling the boy towards the

middle of the mattress. Naruto rubs his eyes with his fists, blinking blearily.

“Juugo?” he says, confused. “What’re you doing here?”

Sasuke opens his mouth to answer, and then pauses as he thinks about what this looks like. It’s not even four in the morning, the sky’s still pitch-black, and he’s breaking into a five-year-old’s bedroom. Sasuke lets out a sigh.

“I-you wanted me to train you,” he says, scratching the back of his head. Naruto perks up at this, a sudden smile curling over his lips as he straightens up.

“Oh yeah! Can we start now? Can we? *Pleas--*”

“Yes, Naruto, we can start now,” Sasuke says, trying not to laugh as Naruto scrambles out of bed with newfound vigor. “But we have to start with breakfast.”

“Did you bring more ramen?” Naruto asks, his eyes growing impossibly wide as he grabs the hem of Sasuke’s shirt. “You’re the best teacher *ever--*”

“What? No,” Sasuke replies, frowning. “You can’t eat ramen all the time, it’s unhealthy. I made you something better already, it’s in the kitchen.”

“But I wanted ramen,” the boy says, crossing his arms. “It’s fine, I can make it myself.”

Sasuke raises an eyebrow as Naruto pouts, wondering how to convince him to just *listen*.

“You know,” he says seriously, letting a solemn expression cover his amusement. “I heard that when he was a boy, the Fourth Hokage would eat lots of vegetables and healthy foods. It’s how he got *so* strong. But it’s fine, I guess I can just take all the groceries I bought and throw them away if you just want ramen...”

“Wait! No!” There’s a frantic patter of bare feet running over the tiled floor as Naruto pushes past him and races into the kitchen, and Sasuke doesn’t try to suppress his laughter this time.

There's a reason Fire Country is renowned for its sunrises. Sasuke can see a broad stripe of color to the east, visible over the roofs of buildings and the canopies of scattered trees. Shades of orange, red, and yellow blend into a blur of color, and the scattered clouds are a dark purple against the blue-black sky.

Even this early, there's people out and about. Civilian men and women hurry to and fro, stores and restaurants and inns opening up. He can catch the occasional flash of green as Leaf Village ninja stride through the sleepy streets. Sasuke smiles as he notices a team of drowsy genin jogging down the road under the watchful eye of their jounin-sensei.

But that smile quickly fades as he notices the hostility directed at the boy walking beside him.

The animosity isn't overt, but even Sasuke can pick up on it instantly, and he's spent the last five years in the wilderness. It's present in the clenching of jaws and the narrowing of eyes as they follow Naruto's steps. It's present in the way people cross the street when they spot the duo coming down the sidewalk. It's present in the hushed whispers between civilians who don't realize Sasuke can hear *every single word*.

But Naruto doesn't seem to mind. There's a skip to his step and a grin on his face, and he keeps curling a tiny hand in the hem of Sasuke's shirt. And he's just *rambling*, blissfully happy.

"—and it was tasty. Not as good as ramen, but it's okay, because you said it'll make me strong. I hope I'll be strong enough to use a fire jutsu. Do you know any? Can you teach me those? Where are we going?"

"We're going to start with the basics, Naruto," Sasuke says. "And I'm taking you to a field. A big, open space where you can train for now."

And then Naruto's off again, his endearing babbling washing over Sasuke like a cool breeze on a scorching summer day. Sasuke's lips twitch slightly into a gentle smile as he remembers another enthusiastic little boy walking these same streets.

It's the height of summer, and the wicked July sun beats down on Sasuke's back. He's walking fast, sandals crushing the dry grass under his feet and raising little clouds of fine dirt as he struggles to keep up with his brother.

Itachi glances over his shoulder, dark eyes warm with amusement as he

extends a hand out to his little brother.

“Come along, Sasuke,” he says. “The faster we get there, the more time I’ll have to teach you.”

Sasuke wastes no time in grabbing the offered hand, snatching it up like some trophy. Secretly, he’d prefer to let Itachi carry him on his back, like he used to do when Sasuke was little. But he’s five years old now. He’s all grown up, and grown-ups don’t let their brothers carry them on their backs. He settles for holding Itachi’s hand real tight.

They arrive at a tree-studded park eventually, one of many scattered throughout the village. This one’s deserted, all uninterrupted sun-bleached grass and rustling foliage.

Sasuke looks up at his brother with wide, adoring eyes.

“Thanks Itachi,” he says, his hand tightening around Itachi’s. “Mother said you’re busy so—so thanks for coming with me.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that, Sasuke,” Itachi says, a crooked smile spreading over his face. “No matter how busy I am, I’ll always have time for you. Always.”

And Sasuke’s so excited, he’s over the moon, because his older brother looks at him like Sasuke is the most important thing in the world. He can’t contain a giddy giggle, leaning into Itachi’s side.

“What are you gonna teach me today?” he asks, his voice muffled by Itachi’s thin shirt. “Can you show me the shurikenjutsu Shisui was talking about? Wait, what about the fireball—”

“Sasuke,” Itachi says gently, his hand pushing Sasuke’s sweaty hair off his forehead. “I’ll show you those in time. But first, I have to show you how to tap into your chakra and how to mold it. That’s the first step to everything else.”

“Ok,” Sasuke says, a little reluctantly. “But you have to promise to teach me the Great Fireball jutsu too. I want Father to be proud of me.”

They’re the words of a child, delivered without resentment and with utmost sincerity, and Itachi frowns.

“Father loves you very much, Sasuke. Sometimes it’s hard to see, but he does,” Itachi says, his hand landing on Sasuke’s shoulder and giving a comforting squeeze.

"I know!" Sasuke says impatiently. "But he's not proud of me yet. I want him to look at me the way he looks at you!"

Itachi stares at him for a minute, and Sasuke can't tell what he's thinking. Then Sasuke lets out a squawk as arms wrap around him, pulling him into a tight embrace that makes him gasp.

"I'm proud of you. I'm so proud of you and I love you and you don't ever have to prove yourself—" Itachi murmurs into his little brother's messy hair.

But Sasuke can barely hear these words, because Itachi's hugging him. His amazing, cool, perfect older brother is hugging him like he's the most important thing in the world, and Sasuke's too dazed to comprehend the words being mumbled into his ear—

"Juuuugo," Naruto says in a sing-song voice.

"Wha?" Sasuke says, still half lost in reminiscence. Naruto points excitedly in front of them, and Sasuke realizes they've reached the park. He hadn't remembered it being nearby, and he wonders how long he'd been daydreaming for.

"Is this the place?" Naruto says, nearly *vibrating* with enthusiasm. "You gotta show me all the strongest jutsu you can! Like, the most--"

"Naruto," Sasuke says, reaching over and ruffling the boy's hair, ignoring the brief scowl he receives in return. "I'll teach you those later, I promise. But right now, I'm going to teach you how to access your chakra and mold it into jutsu."

"Later? You want to do this *again* sometime?" Naruto asks, staring at him with bewildered disbelief. When Sasuke meets his gaze, he can see every thought in the boy's head plastered over his face, and a pang shoots through his chest.

Some things never change.

"Of course I do," he says, and Naruto shakes his head.

"But why?" the boy asks in a small voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Why *me*? No one wants me around," Naruto says. It's not said with any self-pity. There's just resignation and sadness in that voice, and

bright blue eyes look down at the ground. Sasuke doesn't have anything to say to that, can't *think* of anything to say at all, because it feels like someone just kicked him in the chest.

This is how Naruto had grown up.

Sasuke knew this in the abstract. He has vague recollections of this, and Naruto had told him about it. But it's one thing to hear about it from someone else, and it's another to see the evidence firsthand.

It's another thing to watch the normally-sunny and happy kid in front of him fold in on himself, his eyes shining and his lips quivering. And looking at Naruto, noticing how the boy glances up at him for some reassurance or comfort, Sasuke feels like shit.

Because he'd been awful to Naruto. For *so long*, he'd been so horrible--

He remembers Naruto at age twelve, grabbing Sasuke by the collar and glaring into his eyes, silently pleading to be acknowledged. He remembers Naruto crumpled on the ground in the aftermath of their fight, begging him not to leave the Leaf Village. He remembers Naruto's easy smile, welcoming him back to his side as they prepared to fight Madara.

That had been his Naruto.

Always so quick to smile, always so quick to love, always so quick to forgive. He'd forgiven Sasuke for everything, as if it didn't matter how much pain Sasuke had caused. As if Naruto's own pain didn't matter.

And now, staring at this version of the man he loved, Sasuke's heart breaks as he thinks about all the time he wasted, and how long he spent hurting Naruto.

Fuck, Naruto deserved so much *more*. He deserved the best, someone who would love him as vigorously and easily as he loved them. But all he'd ever gotten was Sasuke. All he'd ever gotten was the fucked-up second-best son who ruined *everything* he ever touched, who hurt everyone around him.

Sasuke's eyes sting as he reaches out and grabs Naruto's hand, crouching so he's at eye-level with the boy.

"I'm always going to be here for you," he says softly. "Because I love you."

There's a part of him that screams in discomfort as the words leave his lips. The kid has *no idea* who Sasuke is. This is absurd, ridiculous. But Sasuke waited eighteen years to say these words the first time, and he has no intention of wasting time like that *ever* again.

Naruto's eyes grow wide.

"You do?" he says, suddenly growing very, very still. Sasuke tries to answer, but words can't move past the lump in his throat. He just nods instead.

"No one's ever said that to me before," the boy says, a small hand tightening around Sasuke's fingers.

"I'll tell you that every day if you want me to," Sasuke says, finally finding his voice. Naruto's hand is in his, sweaty and shaking, Naruto's breath tickling his nose. And Sasuke never wants to let go, never wants to leave, never wants to lose this again.

He doesn't think he could survive it.

The last shirt goes into the top-most box, and that's that.

Years of his life, years of *memories*, and they're all condensed into a pair of cardboard boxes sitting on his bare bunk. Itachi looks around, taking in Team Ro's room for the last time. It's unlikely he'll set foot in the ANBU barracks ever again, after all. He's been discharged from ANBU, and his new job will be training under the Third Hokage directly.

Shisui's sitting on his own bunk, the one directly above Itachi's bed, looking down over the edge and giving Itachi a tight smile.

"I'm kind of jealous you get to move out," he says with a forced grin. "The water pressure's shit and it's always cold in here. Not to mention the fact that these mattresses haven't been replaced since the Third War."

And Itachi is a little glad. Life in ANBU is brutal and hard, and there are things he's done that'll stay with him forever. Leaving that behind is... is a good thing. But Itachi's eyes flick over to where Kakashi and Tenzo are sitting together on Kakashi's bunk, and he realizes there are things he's going to miss, too.

The walk back from the Hokage's office after their official debriefing had been quiet, punctuated by Shisui's attempts to lighten the mood and Kakashi's concerned glances. Now, in the windowless gloom of the ANBU barracks, the atmosphere is stifling. Itachi looks up at the ceiling, blinking against the harsh yellow glare from the bare lightbulbs.

"I'll miss all of you," he says slowly. "Except for Shisui. I feel like I'm never going to be rid of him."

"Was that a joke?" Kakashi said, chuckling over Shisui's outraged gasp. "You're a good man, Itachi. You'll make a great Hokage one day."

"I agree," Tenzo says, a kind smile on his face. "You've saved our asses more times than I can count, Itachi. Thank you for everything."

Itachi feels his cheeks grow a little warm, and he looks down at the porcelain mask in his hands.

"You've all saved me plenty of times too," he mumbles, squeezing the edges of the mask until his knuckles turn white. "You don't have to thank me."

The bedframe groans and Shisui lands behind Itachi with a soft rustle, throwing one arm over him.

"You're awful at accepting compliments," he says jokingly, his arm heavy around Itachi's shoulders. Shisui's voice is a merry laugh in his ear, and his breath ghosts over the back of Itachi's neck. "You'll have to get used to them if you're going to be Hokage."

"Leave him alone, Shisui," Tenzo says, balling up a blanket and tossing it across the room. It smacks Itachi in the forehead instead, and he sighs wearily. There are some things he *won't* miss.

There's a pregnant pause, the idle chatter dying out. Itachi looks down at his bare arms, unwilling to meet his former teammates' eyes as his fingers gently probe a bruise that hadn't been there a couple days ago.

Tension still coils and swirls through the air.

It has nothing to do with Itachi's imminent departure, and everything to do with the aftermath of their mission. It's been *years* since they've failed a mission, and no one seems to want to mention it. Shisui's arm leaves his shoulders as the boy steps away. When Itachi sends him a

sidelong glance, there's an anxious expression tugging at Shisui's features that's quickly masked by another forced smile.

"I just don't get it," Shisui says, flopping belly-down on Itachi's bare bed next to the boxes and propping his chin on his hand. "Itachi falls asleep on the job and fails a mission, and he gets *promoted*. The fuck's up with that?"

"I wasn't *sleeping*," Itachi says, setting down his mask and crossing his arms. "It was a genjutsu. The same one *you* were put under, and you have the Mangekyou."

"Exactly! I have the Mangekyou, and you don't," Shisui says, sitting up suddenly and gesturing with passion. "*I* should be Hokage."

"Gods, no," Tenzo says.

"The village wouldn't last a week," Kakashi says, at the exact same time.

"You're all dicks," Shisui grumbles, grabbing one of the boxes and standing up. "Alright, Tachi. Let's go, Mom made lunch and I'm starving."

"You're always starving," Itachi says under his breath, picking up the other box. He glances one more time at Tenzo and Kakashi, a little nervously. "You two should come and visit me sometime."

"Team Ro is on indefinite leave until they investigate Lord Danzo's death, so we'll be around the village--" Kakashi's voice cuts off with a yelp as Tenzo elbows him.

"Why did you tell him that?" Tenzo demands with a grimace. "Now we're going to have to visit *Shisui* you dumbass--"

"Assholes, all of you!" Shisui shouts, stomping out the door melodramatically.

Chapter End Notes

thank you always for the sweet comments <3

beta'd by the amazing outstorm

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Moving Out and Losing Out

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Exhaustion has a way of settling over the vision, of staining everything with an undertone of gray and turning distinct lines into blurs. And Hiruzen's quite exhausted now. He hasn't slept since news came of Danzo's death, and he's barely set foot outside of his office in between the deluge of meetings and debriefings.

He's getting too old for this.

Now, slouching in his chair and rubbing his forehead with one hand, he looks at the three people standing across from him. Jiraiya's scribbling something in a small notebook, his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth. Shikaku Nara looks as tired as Hiruzen feels right now, and he sways like he's about to fall over. The ANBU commander stands a little apart, a porcelain mask concealing his face

"Inoichi Yamanaka's report was given to me this morning. It matches what Team Ro indicated in their debriefing," Hiruzen says. "They're not lying. They genuinely have no recollection of what happened."

"What kind of genjutsu-user could erase the memories of three Sharingan users?" Jiraiya says, a distracted look in his eye as he looks up from his notebook. Shikaku taps his chin with his index finger, a habit of his that Hiruzen's come to find a little endearing.

"It's likely that there were multiple genjutsu-users," he says slowly. "They wouldn't need to be individually strong if they pooled their power."

"Was there evidence that there were multiple assailants?" Jiraiya asks. It's the ANBU commander who answers this time, his voice low.

"There is no *evidence* at all," he says, shaking his head. "Much of the battlefield was obliterated by the massive explosion that led our scouts to the location, and the ensuing forest fire destroyed anything that the blast didn't."

"There were no chakra signatures that were detected?" Hiruzen says, and the ANBU commander shakes his head again.

“It’s a sensory overload. The sensory specialist who investigated the scene couldn’t pick out any individual signatures, and now that it’s been a couple days, it’ll be even harder to identify anything,” he says. “I think it’s a dead end.”

“There is one interesting thing, though, that we can take from this,” Shikaku says. “The members of Team Ro were left alive and relatively unharmed, pretty far away from Lord Danzo’s body. Not only that, but the assailants went to substantial lengths to wipe their memories, when it would have been far easier to kill them.”

“The attackers were only interested in killing Lord Danzo?” Jiraiya asks, frowning.

“It’s more than that. They put in a great deal of effort to make sure that Team Ro would be unharmed,” Shikaku says. “I don’t think this was the work of a different hidden village. No one else would have bothered to spare them, and if they had, they would have been taken prisoner. The attackers could be from the Leaf Village.”

“The body was left in a way that incriminated Lord Danzo,” the ANBU commander says. “This could be a vigilante action, which would fit into your theory.”

“I wouldn’t call it a theory,” Shikaku says, shrugging. “It’s also possible that the assailants aren’t from the Leaf Village. I mean, who was unaccounted for that could even pull this off?”

“It could be a good place to start the investigation. I want to know who did this,” Hiruzen says. He looks at Shikaku. “Team Ro is on indefinite leave, so you’ll have full access to interview them should you need it.”

“One last thing,” Jiraiya says, slipping his notebook into a pocket. “What are you going to do about Root?”

Hiruzen meets Jiraiya’s eyes with a firm, unyielding gaze. He’s been thinking about this since Shikaku first showed him the pictures of Danzo’s stolen Sharingan. A sudden tingle of conviction flows through his torso, through his limbs, washing away the aches and fatigue for a moment.

“We’re going to dismantle it. All of it,” he says. “When his time comes, Itachi Uchiha will never have to deal with this village’s dark side.”

It must be nearing noon, if the sun is anything to go by. It's almost directly overhead, and in the absence of any clouds to soften its glare, it beats down on Itachi's bare arms and sweaty forehead.

It feels good.

They're near the very fringes of the Leaf Village, where the densely packed buildings and narrow streets are replaced with wide, open meadows and scattered houses. Shisui's house is on the very edge of the Uchiha district, and he seems to be doing his best to take them there in a way that minimizes the chances that they'll run into someone. Knowing that, knowing that someone cares enough to try to shield him without even being asked--

It feels *really* good.

"Shisui!" he calls out. They can be as loud as they like out here. It's just the two of them trudging down a dusty path, sweaty and holding boxes in their arms. Shisui looks over his shoulder, his hair damp with sweat and his eyes as bright as the sun high above them.

"Hm?" he says, coming to a halt.

"I've been to your house plenty of times. We've never gone this way before," Itachi says, looking around them. A gentle breeze hisses through dry grass, and a couple swallows loop lazily through the sky.

"Oh. This is a shortcut," Shisui says, eyes following the birds. Itachi's lips twitch as he suppresses a smile at Shisui's feigned nonchalance.

"I'm going to run into my father eventually, Shisui," he says gently, nudging Shisui's heel with the toe of his sandal. "I appreciate you trying to protect me, but it's going to happen eventually."

"I--" Shisui starts to say, then falls silent. He looks a little sheepish at first, but then his mouth turns down at the corners. His eyes flick up to meet Itachi's for a moment before looking away, and he looks conflicted and frustrated and *miserable*.

He's not smiling anymore, and Itachi finds that strange, because Shisui's *always* smiling. Even in the middle of the night, even in the midst of battle, even when he's swaying with exhaustion, there's a wide smile playing over his lips, and without it, the world seems a little dimmer.

"That doesn't mean you have to run into him *now*," Shisui says in a

small voice, sounding a little petulant, and Itachi feels a sudden pang of *something* in his chest. He's not the best at feelings, not the best at expressing himself, but he--

He wants to be. He wants to tell Shisui how thankful he is that the other boy is here, how happy he is that Shisui doesn't hate him after everything that's happened.

"Thank you," Itachi says, looking down at the ground. There's a line of little black ants marching over the dry, fine dirt underfoot, and it's much easier to stare at them instead of meeting Shisui's eyes.

"Of course, Tachi," Shisui says quietly. "Everything's gonna be okay. I promise."

And when Shisui says it like that, when his voice is all serious and low and filled with ironclad, zealous *certainty*, who can doubt him?

Itachi sure as hell can't.

The walls around the Uchiha district cordon off the side of the district that borders the village. But the western edge of the Uchiha district borders nothing but empty fields and scattered groves of trees, buildings giving way to open lots and unpaved paths. The cramped streets and lively atmosphere of the Uchiha district fade away and grow less concentrated, less distinct.

It was out here that Shisui's parents had bought a house when they got married. It was so far out that it was practically in the countryside; it was quiet and spacious, lazy and idyllic. Ren loved taking long morning runs through the fields, and Asami loved the way deer and rabbits would roam through the backyard under the silver moonlight. And they were happy.

Then came the Third Great War.

It was a dark time for anyone living through it; the daily fears of loved ones dying, of coming under attack, of losing everything perpetually hung over every head in the Leaf Village. Ren was gone more often than not, sent off to fight in the war. Asami was not a ninja; she worked as an assistant at the Academy, watching over children she knew would be sent off to fight eventually.

But even in the midst of misery and ruin, there is happiness. Whenever Ren would come back, on leave, he'd walk up the front path of their house and surprise Asami. She'd grab him by the collar of his jacket, dragging him

into a kiss. They'd eat in the backyard during the summer, on blankets spread over cool grass, trying to find animal-shapes in the clouds drifting through azure skies. In the winter they'd sit at their tiny dinner table, and Asami would always scoot her chair so she'd be next to Ren rather than across from him. In the walls of their little home, just for a moment, the war would cease to exist.

And eventually, there was Shisui. He was a terror, of course, a frightfully energetic child with a mad cackle and a brilliant smile, and Ren would give him piggyback rides through the tall grass and wildflower-studded meadows while Asami would laugh and watch.

Then, one day, it wasn't Ren who walked up the front path. It was Fugaku Uchiha, holding a battered Konoha forehead protector in his hands as he told Asami how very sorry he was.

The walls of that little house couldn't keep the war out anymore.

"Mom!" Shisui yells, pushing the door open with his knee. "We're home!"

Itachi sets the box he's holding on the porch, stretching his arms and rolling his shoulders as he looks around. It's just as familiar as it's always been. The same set of wind-chimes still hangs from the roof of the veranda, the same pair of wicker chairs flank a small table, and the same faded railing planter blooms with meticulously-cared-for flowers.

He's been coming here since he was six years old, and sometimes it feels more like *home* than his own family's house.

Shisui attempts to squirm through the half-open front door, stubbornly refusing to set the box he's carrying down, and Itachi rolls his eyes and pushes the door open for him.

"You're so dumb," he says to Shisui, his fond tone taking the edge out of his words. Shisui throws him a disbelieving look, as if he's *never* been accused of being a dumbass, and scowls.

"*You're* the dumb one," he says, brows scrunched in a frown as he glares over his shoulder.

"Shisui! I didn't raise you to be rude to our guests, did I?" a voice calls out from further inside, and then Asami Uchiha is stepping through an

interior door and poking Shisui's arm.

"He started it!" Shisui says, setting down his box beside the door and wrapping his arms around his mother. He's taller than her--has been for a couple years now--and Itachi can see his shoulders relax as she hugs him back. "I missed you, Mom."

"I was worried when they told me you were in the hospital," she says, squeezing Shisui until he lets out a breathless chuckle.

"You'll send me back there if you keep that up," he says weakly. She lets out an amused snort, letting him go as she smiles at Itachi, and Itachi remembers that Shisui's bright, sunny grins are clearly an inherited trait.

"It's been too long, Itachi," she says warmly, stepping closer. He only has a moment of warning before he's enveloped in a crushing hug of his own. And as the breath is forcibly expelled from his lungs, some of the tension leaves his body too.

"I saw you just last week," he manages to gasp, and Asami grins evilly as she lets him go and musses up his hair.

"You know, when you were like eight, all you wanted to do was garden with me," she says, a wistful look passing over her face as she looks between Itachi and Shisui. "When did the two of you get all grown up?"

"I'll garden with you!" Shisui says, now sitting on the box he set down earlier and swinging his legs. Asami looks over, raising an eyebrow.

"You set my tomato plants on fire last month," she says mildly, and Shisui sighs.

"It was an accident, Mom..." Shisui starts to say, whining, and then they're off. Itachi watches them, a little amused, a little awed. He really should be used to them acting like this by now--he's been a witness to it for over ten years--but it never fails to catch him off-guard. The easy bickering, the casual affection, the abundance of sincere laughter...

They don't act *anything* like his own family.

A breeze flutters through the open door, tugging at Itachi's shirt and sending delicious streamers of cold air over his sweat-speckled arms. It brushes through Asami's hair, and she turns slightly, looking a little

embarrassed as she realizes Itachi's still standing in the doorway.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," she says, shaking her head. "Come inside! Let's get you settled in. Shisui, can you grab the box from the porch while I take Itachi upstairs?"

"Sure thing," Shisui drawls, reaching up and stretching like a tomcat in the sun, his fingers nearly brushing the low ceiling. Itachi opens his mouth to ask where he's staying--he knows this house better than his own, and there's only two bedrooms--but Asami grabs him by the hand and drags him along.

"I want you to make yourself comfortable, Itachi," she says as they ascend the steep, narrow staircase. "This is your home just as much as it's mine or Shisui's, okay?"

Itachi doesn't know what to say to that, and there's a lump in his throat anyway, so he just swallows and nods as Asami grins at him.

"Bet you remember this room," she says, pushing open the door to Shisui's bedroom, and Itachi pauses at the threshold. His gaze roams over baby blue walls, a half-dozen dumbbells peeking out from under Shisui's bed, and the ratty old couch (that Shisui loved for some *inexplicable* reason) crammed against the far wall. Nothing's changed since those days where Itachi would sleep over, those June nights when they'd crack open the window and talk until the sun came up. It's cluttered, it's full of life, it's so *Shisui*.

"This takes me back," Itachi says eventually, once he's able to find his voice, and Asami chuckles. He hears the tramp of feet stomping up the staircase, and then Shisui's nudging him forward, pushing the box he's holding against Itachi's back.

"Lemme in," he says, and Itachi steps aside. "So, what do you think, Tachi?"

"What do you mean?" Itachi asks, confused. "I've seen your room plenty of times before."

"Well, yeah, but I bought those dango-themed bed sheets for you," Shisui says, setting down the box and gesturing proudly. Itachi shakes his head, his eyes widening.

"No--no I can't kick you out of your own room--" he says, and now it's Shisui's turn to look confused.

“Kick me out? What? I’ll just sleep on the couch while I’m on leave,” he says. Itachi looks at the old, brown couch, noting the way the cushions sag and how it leaks stuffing onto the carpet.

“I can’t believe you still have that,” Itachi says drily, and Asami sighs theatrically.

“I’ve been trying to throw it out for a while now, but he won’t let me,” she says, crossing her arms. Shisui gasps loudly, clapping a hand over his heart and looking absolutely *scandalized*.

“We,” he says deliberately, “are *not* throwing out Couchy. He’s family.”

“You won’t even let me mend it,” Asami says mournfully, looking at the stuffing scattered all over the floor. “It’s making a mess.”

“Couchy adds *character* to the room, Mom,” Shisui says impatiently, waving a hand in the air. “We’ve been over this.”

They’re arguing again, in that special, playful way of theirs, but Itachi isn’t paying attention. He’s staring at the new sheets Shisui bought for him. He’s noticing the vase of fresh flowers on the bedside table Asami must have picked for him. He’s glancing at the back of Shisui’s neck, shining slightly with sweat, because Shisui had taken it upon himself to both invite Itachi into his home *and* help him move with zero hesitation.

“Thank you,” he says quietly, and the other two turn to look at him with some surprise. “I don’t--I just wanted to thank both of you for letting me stay with you.”

“Of course, honey,” Asami says, her eyes softening. “You can stay here for as long as you want. You’re family.”

“Just like Couchy,” Shisui adds in, giving Itachi a lopsided smirk. The ring of a cooking timer echoes from downstairs, and Asami’s head snaps to the door.

“I almost forgot!” she says, rushing out. “I have something in the oven. Shisui, help him settle in?”

“ ‘Course,” Shisui says easily. “You need help unpacking, Tachi?”

Itachi lets out a slow breath, looking out the window and into the backyard. His heart’s beating furiously, the lump in his throat’s getting

bigger and bigger, and he's feeling out of breath.

No, he wants to say. *No, you can go. It's fine.* But something's strangling his words as they rise, and all that comes out is a little gasp.

He wants to be alone, because he sees the casual affection on Shisui and Asami's faces, and he knows he doesn't *deserve* it. Because all he can think about right now is that cramped little hospital room, and all he can see is the grief and disappointment on his father's face.

Would you have taken up arms against the clan?

Itachi knows what his answer is, and it makes him sick.

He imagines Asami and Shisui butchered, laying in their own blood, their vacant and accusing eyes fixed on him. He imagines Sasuke, still and pale, and that's when the dam breaks. That's when the guilt under the surface rears its ugly, ugly head, and Itachi screws his eyes shut and clenches his fists.

"Itachi!" he hears Shisui say, his voice dripping with concern and affection, and his stomach turns. He doesn't deserve that. He doesn't deserve *this*, to be welcomed with open arms, to have affection and care lavished upon him.

Because Itachi Uchiha is a *traitor*. He's a liar, and a traitor, and he would have been a murderer, too. He's sure of it. If it really came down to it, if it had been something he had been ordered to do--

Danzo had started dropping hints. Whenever Itachi or Shisui would finish giving the council their reports on the progress of the coup, Danzo would glare at Hiruzen and talk about 'pre-emptive action' and 'the ultimate penalty for treason'.

Would you have taken up arms against the clan?

Shisui's arms are around him, and Itachi pushes against him weakly. He doesn't deserve affection, no, all he deserves is mistrust and hatred, and his father is *right* to hate him--

"I'm a monster," Itachi whispers, lips against Shisui's shirt and forehead pressed against Shisui's collarbone. "I'm a traitor, Shisui. I don't--I don't *deserve* this..."

"Hey," Shisui says, his breath warming the top of Itachi's head. "You're not a monster. C'mon, Tachi, it's fine now--"

“Is everything alright?” Asami says, her voice coming from the direction of the door. Itachi stiffens, trying to slip out of Shisui’s embrace, but Shisui’s arms tighten around him and hold him in place.

“It’s fine, Mom,” Shisui says softly. “Can we have a minute?”

“Oh, of course,” Asami replies, her footsteps already receding. “Whenever you two are ready, come on down for lunch.”

“Shisui--” Itachi mumbles, trying to pull away, but the other boy stubbornly holds on.

“Quit squirming,” Shisui says, squeezing Itachi once. “Just go with it, okay?”

So Itachi goes with it. It’s just the two of them, alone in the room where they’ve spent countless hours talking and wrestling and playing. The window’s cracked open, and snippets of birdsong drift through. Itachi can barely hear it over his own ragged breathing, or the sound of Shisui’s heartbeat, so he stills until the melodic chirping fills his mind. He closes his eyes, leaning into his best friend.

It’s just the two of them, swaying slightly in the sunlight. And if a single, traitorous tear slips out from Itachi’s closed eye to soak into the fabric of Shisui’s shirt, well--

No one has to know about that.

The door to Team Ro’s room flies open with a bang, and Tenzo barges in. He flops down belly-first on Kakashi’s bed with enough force to make the bed frame creak, propping his chin on his fist and looking at Kakashi expectantly.

Kakashi turns the page of the book he’s reading at his desk, not looking up. Tenzo sighs.

“You don’t pay enough attention to me,” he whines, rolling onto his back and letting out a breath. Kakashi looks up, shaking his head.

“I’ve found that it only encourages you,” he says, setting down his book. “What’s up?”

“Where are we going for dinner? I’m kind of in the mood for barbeque,” Tenzo says, rubbing his hands together.

"I was going to eat at the cafeteria here," Kakashi says. "You're welcome to come--"

"What?" Tenzo yelps. "We're on leave. That means we can *leave* this godforsaken hole in the ground, and you want to *stay*?"

"Where would I even go?" Kakashi asks, a puzzled frown on his face. Tenzo snorts.

"Uh, how about *your apartment*? Gods, you're a dumbass sometimes," he shoots back, muttering the last part. Kakashi raises an eyebrow.

"Did you just call your superior a dumbass?" he asks mildly, crossing his arms. Tenzo sits up, an insolent smirk on his face.

"I'm sorry. *Captain* Kakashi Hatake," he purrs in a breathy voice, fluttering his eyelashes. "Will you *please* escort me to dinner, you big--"

"Holy shit," Kakashi says, making a show of clapping his hands over his ears. "Shut up. Fine. We can go, just *never do that ever again*."

Lengthening shadows, stretching like long, dark fingers over the streets and shops and homes of the Uchiha district, mark the progress of the setting sun. Fugaku's no stranger to working late and long hours, but the past few days have been longer than most. He's exhausted and drained and resigned and he just--

He just unlocks the front door with a click, pushing it open, standing in the darkened foyer with the lights off and the door ajar behind him. For a long, long moment, he stands still in the gloom.

Mikoto must have heard him arrive, because the lights turn on and she's standing there. She smiles gently at him, the expression not quite reaching her eyes, and steps up to him.

"Welcome home," she says softly.

Home.

What a strange word. This *is* his home, his family's home. They've lived here for years. Mikoto had told him she was pregnant with their first child in this very spot. Itachi took his first steps through this room. Fugaku had carried a newborn Sasuke over the threshold

behind him.

But all of those memories can't dull the pain of what's gone.

Home is a strange word, because this place can mean *so much*, but without the people that once filled this place, it means nothing at all. No, it's worse than that, because all he can see when he looks around this house are memories of what once was, of how Itachi used to be.

How their family used to be.

Mikoto takes him by the hand, leading him into the living room. He lets her, stumbling after her like a drunk, senseless fool. He's always been a warrior, a prodigy, the fearless leader of the Uchiha. But it's Mikoto who's strong, not him; he's a taut wire, tension pulling at every fiber of his being until he feels like he might snap. Sometimes he feels like Mikoto's voice, her touch, the way she looks at him--it's the only thing keeping him sane.

She's always been able to take care of him like that, always been so caring and so kind to him. She'd held him as he mourned his father, cradling him after the clan head succession ceremony. She'd held him at his brother's funeral, when the world felt cruel and its barbarity made no sense to him. He wants nothing more than to let her hold him again, to let her rock his head until the anguish and the pain goes away.

But he doesn't have that luxury.

He tugs on her hand, pulling her back to him, and they stand close together. Mikoto's eyes are a little wide, but she relaxes against him as he strokes her cheek. And slowly, making sure his voice doesn't waver or betray him, Fugaku speaks.

"Itachi was discharged from the hospital this morning," he says. Mikoto raises her index finger to her lips, gesturing over her shoulder. In the dim light of a lamp, Fugaku can see little Sasuke curled up on the couch, fast asleep.

So Fugaku drops his voice to a whisper, and tells his wife how their son won't be coming home to them tonight. Maybe not ever.

Mikoto's eyes drop to the floor, her hand curling around the nape of his neck as she leans into him. And Fugaku *hates* it, hates when she looks like this, but for once, there's nothing he can do. There's no one to fight, no enemy to vanquish, no way to save the day. No, there's

just the mistakes Fugaku made, and the actions Itachi took.

“Have you eaten?” Mikoto whispers, taking a step back. Fugaku shakes his head.

“I’m not hungry,” he replies quietly. Mikoto steps into the kitchen anyway, making him something, and he doesn’t have the energy to tell her to stop. He sits on the couch instead, watching Sasuke sleep.

It’s been a while since he last saw his son, *really* saw him. It’s been a busy couple of years; he’s been worrying about the clan, about the coup, about Itachi. And somewhere in that time, he realizes he forgot all about Sasuke.

In his mind, Sasuke’s still a little toddler who loathes being separated from his brother. Fugaku can relate to *that* sentiment. But now he’s looking at how long Sasuke’s tiny legs have gotten, how his facial features have become more prominent, and how he’s not quite the little boy Fugaku remembers.

“When did you get so big?” Fugaku murmurs, brushing Sasuke’s cheek tenderly with the back of his hand. He’s trying to be quiet, but his youngest son stirs, his lips twitching and his nose wrinkling. Then Sasuke scrambles to sit up, eyes blown wide open and mouth hanging open with surprise.

“F-father,” he stammers out. Fugaku lets his hand drop to his side, and gives his son a tired smile.

“Hello, Sasuke,” he says.

“Can Itachi come home yet?” Sasuke asks, trying unsuccessfully to mask his excitement.

“He’s going to be staying somewhere else for a little while,” Fugaku says awkwardly. He’s never been good with this--it was always Mikoto who always knew how to make Sasuke smile, how to cheer him up--but he reaches out with one hand and rests it on his youngest son’s shoulder.

“Why?” Sasuke asks, looking confused and hurt and *sad*. And Fugaku doesn’t know what to tell him, he doesn’t know what to *fucking* say, because how can he tell Sasuke what Itachi came close to doing? How can he destroy his child’s world like that?

If it came to it, would you have taken up arms against the clan?

He can still see Itachi as a child, face contorted with effort as Fugaku taught him how to mold his chakra. He can still see Itachi in his mind's eye the day he joined ANBU, standing in his grey-and-black-uniform, and he remembers telling his son how proud he was. And he can see Itachi's face, pale against the hospital sheets, the truth hanging between them like an iron curtain.

Fugaku wonders if Itachi would have spared Sasuke, or if he would have killed him alongside his parents.

Maybe if Fugaku were a better man, a better father, a better leader, they wouldn't be here now.

But he's not a better man. He's just himself, and that has never seemed more inadequate than it does now.

And now he's looking at Sasuke's face, tilted up and trusting and open, praying feverishly that he doesn't fuck up again, that he doesn't drive another son away from himself. Hands shaking, heart pounding, palms sweaty, he reaches forward and presses a gentle kiss to Sasuke's forehead.

"I love you," he says, the words alien and awkward on his tongue. "Sasuke, I-I love you so much..."

He didn't think Sasuke's eyes could grow any wider, but they do.

"I love you too," he says in a small voice, his hands coming up to grab Fugaku's shirt. And maybe everything outside is wrong, maybe everything else feels awful and fucked up and desolate.

But this, right here, feels amazing.

So Fugaku hugs his son for the first time in a long, long time, not caring how clumsy or undignified he looks while doing so.

Chapter End Notes

omg it's been a while! this chapter was so fkin LONG (by my standards, at least), so i hope it makes up for it!

NOTE: I changed the canon around Shisui's parents a little. We're already in an AU, might as well do whatever I want, right? Also I'm going to try and be better about replying to comments now, I'm pledging to do this in front of all of y'all so I better follow through >.>

Beta'd by the incredible, the talented, and the infinitely patient
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The Mysterious Stranger

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sometimes Sasuke wonders what it would have been like to fall under the Eternal Tsukuyomi. He recalls how Madara described it, years ago; a perfect dream world free from grief, free from pain, free from death. He's never experienced it himself.

But sitting in the grass next to a five-year-old Naruto, he wonders if this is as close as it gets.

Naruto slumps on the grass next to him, little lips caught in a pout as he scowls. Before he even realizes it, Sasuke's reaching over and brushing a stray leaf from the boy's hair.

"I can't do it," Naruto says, scratching the back of his head. Sasuke stares at him with wide eyes, briefly forgetting how to speak.

There are familiar gestures, mannerisms, expressions that flit over this Naruto's face from time to time that were things *his* Naruto would do. And seeing these things again, finding little pieces of Naruto like this--

Sasuke could spend the rest of his life chasing those fragments.

"I can't do anything," Naruto continues, and Sasuke realizes that he should probably reassure the boy rather than gawk at him with misty, vacant eyes. He clears his throat.

"You're still new to it. It's not a big deal," he says, poking the boy's shoulder. "There's nothing wrong with struggling to learn. The only bad thing is quitting."

Hopeful blue eyes glance up from the ground and root Sasuke in place, and Naruto's voice is filled with naive, reborn zeal.

"I won't give up!" he yelps, scrambling back to his feet, and Sasuke smiles slightly. For a minute, he watches Naruto attempt his exercises. They're in the shade of a tree, and sunlight glimmers through the foliage to dapple the grass with a thousand specks of gold; when the light catches Naruto's hair, it glints. There's a wind too, a gentle breeze that lifts silvery dandelion seeds aloft and elicits a whispery rustle from the dry leaves above him.

And several dozen meters away, ensconced in a particularly stout oak tree, is the same chakra signature he's been sensing since this morning. The signature bears the slightly muted tone of a person trying to be stealthy, but Sasuke can feel its crackling lightning and quiet steel easily. He sighs.

It's been four hours of Kakashi following the two of them silently, and the man still hasn't given up.

He'd thought for a moment that his genjutsu had worn off, and that Kakashi was going to try and confront him. But the other man's been content to follow and watch, and eventually Sasuke had realized that it was *Naruto* being followed, not him.

Sasuke snorts with amusement, realizing that Naruto's inadvertently gained a second overprotective stalker.

It's almost four o'clock in the afternoon when Kakashi reaches Tenzo's apartment, pounding on the door and breathing heavily. His back is stiff from crouching in one position for hours, and he'd scraped the heel of his palm earlier in his haste to jump down from a tree branch. But these things barely register in his mind as he raps on Tenzo's door again, cursing his friend's lack of *urgency*.

The door opens eventually, after what feels like a lifetime, and Kakashi doesn't even hesitate before pushing his way inside. Tenzo glares at him balefully, his hair rumpled and his shirt half-on, his brown eyes still lidded with drowsiness.

"Sure, come on in," he says, rubbing at an eye with a fist. "I was sleeping, you know. Enjoying my first full day of being on leave--"

"There's a stranger hanging around Naruto," Kakashi says, as if Tenzo hadn't even spoken. He grabs Tenzo's arm, pulling him towards the door. "We have to tell the Hokage, let's go--"

"Wait, what?" Tenzo says, dragging his feet until Kakashi lets him go with an exasperated sigh. "Slow down and start from the beginning."

"I was at Naruto's apartment. Keeping an eye on things," Kakashi says, the tips of his ears growing a little warm as Tenzo raises an eyebrow at him.

"It's not weird," he says defensively. "I'm not allowed to talk to him,

but that doesn't mean I can't watch over him."

"It's fine, Kakashi," Tenzo says quietly, the exhaustion and irritation in his face draining out as he examines Kakashi with concern. "I understand. You don't have to defend yourself to me. But what *happened*?"

"Right. Uh--" Kakashi says, recollecting his thoughts. He's winded and jittery, and that's *weird*, because he *never* gets nervous. "A guy came to his apartment. He was young--definitely not older than us. Naruto seemed to recognize him and they left together."

"That's strange," Tenzo says. His face is relatively impassive, but Kakashi's known him long enough to pick up on the anxious tension in the lines of the man's body. "Where did they go?"

"To the park," Kakashi says.

And Tenzo stares at him for a long moment.

"I thought--you made it seem like Naruto was in danger," Tenzo says after the pause. Kakashi frowns, not understanding.

"He *is*," he insists. "It's a *stranger*, Tenzo. We can't just leave him alone with someone! We have to get the Hokage to reinstate Naruto's ANBU guard."

"Did this stranger act suspicious? What did they do in the park?" Tenzo asks.

"Um..." Kakashi says, faltering now. "Well, Naruto ran around and played a bit. And they picked wildflowers and blew on dandelion seeds. The stranger showed him some stretches."

"Kakashi," Tenzo says patiently. "We can't go to the Hokage with this. The village is short-staffed as is, he's not going to waste ANBU resources."

"But if we found proof the stranger was suspicious, would he? Like, if I was able to find something?" Kakashi asks, already planning out something in his head.

"Kakashi! That's not what I meant," Tenzo says wearily. He leans forward abruptly, examining Kakashi with suspicion. "You're *jealous*, aren't you?"

“Jealous?” Kakashi scoffs, scandalized at the *very* suggestion. “Why would you think that?”

“I mean, you care alot about Naruto, don’t you?” Tenzo says thoughtfully. “I don’t think it’s unreasonable for you to feel a little jealous that someone else is able to be his friend when you’ve been barred from doing so.”

“That’s not--no, that’s--” Kakashi sputters for a moment, then takes a breath. “Why is someone trying to get close to the nine-tails’ vessel *now*, all of a sudden? No one’s bothered to take care of him for *years*, and now someone’s taking him to the park. The *park*, Tenzo. No one’s ever taken Naruto to the *park* before!”

“Alright. Fine,” Tenzo says, looking resigned. “How can I help?”

“We have to guard Naruto while we gather more information,” Kakashi responds instantly. “We’ll meet at my place at five in the morning tomorrow--”

“What the *fuck*? *Five*?” Tenzo interrupts, looking absolutely horrified. “Actually, maybe it would be better for you to undertake this mission solo...”

“I think Shisui wanted to come visit you,” Kakashi continues, in a conversational tone. “He said he wanted to see your new apartment, but you didn’t tell him the address. I guess I could give it to him--”

“You *wouldn’t*,” Tenzo mumbles, growing pale. “Kakashi, you wouldn’t do that--”

“I guess we can talk about it. At five, tomorrow morning,” Kakashi replies cheerfully, and Tenzo groans as he buries his face in his hands.

“Gods, fine. You’re a fucking jackass,” he says, his voice muffled. He looks up, skewering Kakashi with a brutal glare. “Now get out of my apartment.”

“Love you too--”

“*Out!*”

The ground warps and darkens, and a wretched creature bursts forth. It staggers forward on deformed legs, half-black and half-white,

scuttling between the two rows of rough, stone-hewn thrones. Some look upon the creature with derision; others avert their eyes, casting fearful glances towards the shadowy figure standing at the head of the room. But when Zetsu speaks, every person in the room pays attention.

“Danzo Shimura is dead, and Root has been disbanded,” Zetsu gurgles, a shrill voice torn from two separate throats. The proclamation rings through the vast reaches of the cavern, echoing and hanging in the cool, dry air. The declaration is met with deafening stillness, until--

“Zetsu! You’re back!”

The joyful, child-like voice emanates from a man in an orange mask, a man who’s fearlessly running up to Zetsu and gamboling around him.

“I missed you while you were gone,” the masked man says. “Say, did you bring anything cool back--”

“Tobi!” a green-eyed man snaps, his voice a menacing, gruff growl. “Quiet!”

Hanging his head, Tobi seems to almost deflate as he skulks back into the shadows. The next words come from a man with long black hair and unsettling yellow eyes. His vertical pupils dilate in the half-light of the cavern, and there’s something poisonous in the smooth, sibilant sound of his voice.

“How interesting,” he says. “Are you sure of this?”

“I saw the body myself, along with the *modifications* you had given him,” Zetsu replies, one eye turning in its socket to address Orochimaru while the other stares straight ahead.

“Such a pity,” Orochimaru muses, tapping his finger against his pale, thin lips. “Were the eyes damaged beyond recov--”

“Who is responsible?” a harsh, rasping voice calls out. With a rhythmic clicking, an inhuman shape uncurls itself and leans forward, mechanical jaw clacking. “Who could be capable of this?”

“Why does it matter, Sasori?” a massive, blue-hued man replies in a bored tone, lazily cleaning out scraps of meat from between jagged teeth with a slender senbon. “It’s not like we ever leave this fucking dump.”

Shocked silence is the first response to Kisame's careless words, and terrified anticipation is the second. At the head of the room, the figure facing away from the assembly finally turns to regard the others.

"Enough."

And if Zetsu's voice was repulsive, if Orochimaru's was dangerously hypnotic, if Sasori's held the promise of violence, this voice--

This voice is *power*. It's a deep baritone that makes the air thrum, that makes grown men break into cold sweats and cower. Even prideful Kakuzu looks away, sinking back into his seat.

The vaguest outline of the figure can be seen in the murk, his features shrouded in inky darkness. But his eyes glow, concentric rings and purple light blazing from the dark, skimming over each and every person present, until they finally settle on one of them.

"Orochimaru," the man says. "You will travel to the Leaf Village and retrieve the nine-tails' vessel while they are vulnerable. You will do this, or you will die."

"Of course," Orochimaru says, inclining his head in acknowledgement as a sickening smile stretches over his face. "It will be done."

Chapter End Notes

As a side note, Deidara is a member of the Akatsuki in this fic even though Itachi was not around to recruit him--it's canon divergence, so let's just go with it ;D

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Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The message had come at breakfast time, a scroll delivered by a silent ANBU that told Itachi that his apprenticeship wouldn't start until next week. Itachi had been a bit confused, Shisui had been *ecstatic*, and Asami had looked rather amused as her son dragged Itachi out of the house.

"Where are we going?" Itachi had asked, puzzled, as Shisui's grip on his forearm pulled him into the sunlit backyard. Shisui's only response was to point towards the line of birch and oak trees in the distance, grinning like a madman.

"The creek!" he'd yelled, yanking his shirt over his head and onto the grass, and Itachi had groaned.

"*Absolutely* not," Itachi had said, snatching his hand out of Shisui's. He'd started walking back towards the house when Shisui had tackled him, slamming him face down into the turf. A couple seconds of frantic squirming put Itachi flat on his back, glaring at Shisui as the other boy straddled him, a cocky smirk on his face.

"What was that for?" Itachi had growled, trying unsuccessfully to buck his way free. Shisui had just leaned back, giving Itachi more room to move as his eyes glinted with savage glee, issuing a playful challenge.

So here they are, twenty minutes later, grappling in the empty field behind the house, all thoughts of swimming in the creek forgotten. Itachi spits out a couple wayward blades of grass and wipes the sweat off his forehead, and Shisui looks down at the streaks of mud caked over his bare chest and lets out a chuckle.

"Call it a draw?" he says, sticking out his hand. Itachi stares at it suspiciously, and Shisui rolls his eyes.

"It's not a trap," he says, holding up his hands, and now it's Itachi's turn to roll his eyes. He's an ANBU, or at least he *was*. He's wise to *all* of Shisui's tricks, and when the other boy body-flickers to him, Itachi's already darting backwards. Barely dodging a grasping hand, Itachi drops into a dive, his shirt sliding against the grass until his fingers find what he's looking for.

The nozzle of the hose.

Shisui's eyes widen comically as Itachi aims the hose and lets loose with the highest setting on the plastic nozzle. The jet of water hisses and splatters, drowning out Shisui's gurgling cry of surprise as he tries to block the incoming deluge with his hands.

And there's something about the ridiculous way Shisui hops away over the grass, something about the way his soaked hair curls and sticks to his forehead and hangs over his eyes, something about the way he shouts--

"Mercy! Mercy!"

Itachi can't help *laughing*, barely hanging on to the hose as he snickers at Shisui's howl of mock-outrage. He's aiming the water to blast off the dried mud covering Shisui's stomach and chest when the sound of the screen door banging open echoes through the yard.

"Boys?" Asami calls out, leaning out the back door. "I'm leaving for work now, I'll be back later."

Itachi freezes, *mortified*, and feels his cheeks grow warm. He'd forgotten that Asami was home--

"There's leftovers in the fridge if you're hungry," Asami says casually, seemingly unbothered by the strange scene unfolding before her.

"Mom!" Shisui whines, using both hands to deflect the stream of water. "Aren't you going to *save* me?"

"Itachi, I think you missed a spot. Make sure he doesn't track any mud inside," Asami says, letting the screen door slam shut as she disappears inside the house.

Now Itachi's *guffawing*, gasping for breath as he chortles on the ground. Somewhere along the way, Shisui manages to lunge forward and wrest the hose from his grasp, spraying Itachi head-to-toe with icy water and soaking him all the way through. Shisui looks down, slicking his sopping-wet hair back and flashing a self-satisfied smile.

"Guess we didn't need the creek after all, huh?" he says, turning off the hose and throwing it aside. Itachi tries to catch his breath, propping himself up on his elbows and shaking his head. It occurs to him that this is the longest he's gone without thinking about his father, or his family, or anything else--

“So what do you wanna do now?” Shisui says, flopping down next to him. Itachi stares out over the meadow, watching the crisp morning sun peer out from behind downy, rounded clouds. There’s a flicker of red and black as a butterfly flits over the flower-studded field, its path jerky and erratic as the gentle breeze tugs at its wings.

“I’m glad you’re here, Shisui,” Itachi says, following the progress of the butterfly. Grass rustles near his ear, and he knows Shisui’s laying on his side and studying him.

“You’re thinking again,” Shisui grumbles. “Stop that.”

“One of us has to,” Itachi replies drily, and Shisui laughs.

“The whole point of this was to *stop* you from thinking,” he says, reaching out and grabbing Itachi’s upper arm, squeezing it reassuringly.

“You’re gonna be okay,” Shisui says quietly, and Itachi thinks about that for a moment before nodding. He’s told himself that before, of course. Not because he believed it himself, but because *Shisui* told him things would work out, and Itachi trusts him.

And now, in the vibrant light of that morning sun, by the side of the one person he’s always been able to trust, something finally feels different. Itachi feels a sense of acceptance settle over himself. The road’s hard, the water’s rough, and it hurts like hell--but he’s going to be fine.

“I’m not okay now,” Itachi says with a tired smile, glancing at the other boy. “But I *will* be.”

“Thank you for the full report of the evaluation, Inoichi,” Hiruzen says, setting the manila folder aside. “You’re sure there’s no lasting influence on the members of Team Ro?”

“None that we could find. Except for the missing memories, there’s nothing wrong with them,” Inoichi Yamanaka replies. There’s a hint of hesitation, a note of reluctance in his voice, and Hiruzen directs a meaningful look towards where Jiraiya is leaning against the office’s wall.

“Is there something else?” Hiruzen prompts.

"I, uh..." Inoichi says, looking *very* uncertain. He shifts from one leg to the other, and his gaze falls to the floor. "I don't want to overstep, Lord Hokage--"

"It's alright. If there's something you want to say, go ahead," Hiruzen says, curious.

"The Konoha Police Force members who possess awakened Sharingan have a special method of compiling evidence, to my understanding," Inoichi says, hands clasped in front of him. "They can preserve memories with their Sharingan in a manner that cannot be tampered with, not even by a powerful genjutsu."

"This is true," Hiruzen says thoughtfully. "You think that there may be some salvageable information locked away in the Sharingan of the ANBU involved?"

"I don't know," Inoichi says, shaking his head. "It *was* a genjutsu that erased the ANBU's recollection of the encounter. It's possible that some information may have survived this way, but our evaluation didn't consider that avenue of inquiry. We had neither permission, nor the expertise needed to examine their Sharingan in detail."

"One of the Police Force's higher-ups could probably access any memories that the evaluation missed," Jiraiya says from behind Inoichi.

"It's certainly worth a try. I'll send a message to Fugaku requesting his assistance today," Hiruzen says, already reaching for a pen. "Thank you, Inoichi. You might have given us a new lead."

"Thank you, Lord Hokage."

This fucking *sucks*.

Kakashi just *knows* there's something amiss with the black-haired stranger. His instincts are never off; there's more to the mystery man than meets the eye.

But hours of watching Naruto and the stranger visit the park had yielded *nothing*, and Kakashi could hear the unspoken "I-told-you-so" in Tenzo's slightly-skeptical glances. But Kakashi still had one lead, one thing he still wanted to investigate.

Late last night, he'd followed the stranger to an old inn near the southern edge of Konoha. The man had disappeared inside, and Kakashi felt his strangely-hazy chakra signature dim as he slept.

"You want to *break* into someone's room?" Tenzo had whispered furiously after Kakashi's explanation.

"Just to look around--"

"That's *breaking and entering*, Kakashi, it's *illegal*--"

So Tenzo had stayed behind, opting to find a comfortable perch in an old oak tree from where he could keep watch on the stranger, and Kakashi had made his way to the address he'd scrawled down hastily the previous night.

Now he's standing in front of the homey-looking inn. It's crowded; Kakashi can see the shifting silhouettes of patrons in the windows lining the building's face. When he pushes the door open and slips inside, a wave of drunken conversation and warm air sweeps over him.

He's standing in a low-ceilinged foyer, and there's a set of double doors flung open to his right that lead to the bar. To his left, a narrow little staircase rises steeply; presumably, this leads to the rooms.

Kakashi walks forward slowly, until he's standing in front of the main desk. The brown-haired woman looks up from her book, offering him a professional smile as she stands up.

"Welcome to the Sunset Inn!" she says brightly. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for someone," Kakashi says. He points to the forehead-protector tied around his upper arm, a symbol of his authority. "Are you familiar with the people staying here?"

"Yes," the woman says, her eyes wide. "I--uh, I'm at the front desk five days a week."

Kakashi nods, reminding himself to relax slightly. The clerk is growing paler by the

second, and he doesn't want to intimidate or scare her. Or make her faint. It's happened before.

"Has a black-haired man with an eyepatch come inside? Has he been

staying here?" he asks. The clerk frowns for a moment, thinking, before shaking her head.

"No," she says. "No one with an eyepatch, or anything like that."

Kakashi pauses, puzzled. He can *clearly* remember the man coming into this very room last night, so her response doesn't make sense--

"Juugo," he says, remembering what Naruto called the man. "Has anyone with that name stayed here the past couple of days?"

"That doesn't sound familiar," the clerk replies, looking down at the ledger behind the desk. She flips through a page or two, then looks up. "No, there's no one with that name that I can remember, and there's no Juugo in the ledger either."

"Can I see?" Kakashi asks politely, reaching out for the heavy book. He rifles through the pages up to a week back, but none of the names jump out at him. Kakashi closes the book, his gaze flicking up to examine the anxious clerk.

"I'm sorry," he says softly, pushing his hair back and opening his left eye. "But that's not possible..."

She stiffens as his Sharingan-empowered gaze delves into her mind, flickering through her memories as if they were just pages in the ledger on the desk. He's gentle, or at least as gentle as he can be--civilian minds rarely can handle this strain--as he combs through her recollections.

And then he sees it.

It's subtle to the point of artistry, a delicate sliver of exquisitely-formed chakra deep in the clerk's subconscious. It's a genjutsu, that much Kakashi can tell, but he's *never* seen one like this. He can almost *see* the elegant filigree, hidden in a corner of her mind, and he realizes it's clouding the clerk's perception and memory simultaneously.

Someone's put a genjutsu on her that prevents her from noticing or remembering certain things, and he has a *pretty* good idea who's responsible for it. Kakashi knew it, he fucking *knew* it from the very start. Once they report this infiltration to the Hokage, he's going to demand to be assigned to guard Naruto for the rest of the boy's *life*--

Tenzo's alarm fills his mind suddenly, startling Kakashi. Tenzo's chakra signature is nearby, just down the street--

Why? Tenzo's supposed to be tailing the stranger down at the park. But he's *here*, which means--

With a muttered curse, Kakashi scrambles through the double-doors and into the bar. A half-dozen tables fill the far side of the room, and Kakashi collapses into a free chair next to one of them, ignoring the intoxicated stupefaction of men around him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kakashi catches a flicker of movement as the stranger's black cloak comes into view. The figure pauses in the lobby, and Kakashi grits his teeth as he realizes the poor clerk is probably either shell-shocked or unconscious from the ordeal he'd put her through.

After a long moment, however, the stranger turns and disappears up the staircase. Kakashi waits ten long, stomach-turning minutes before he gets up and leaves the inn. It's only been an hour since he was last outside, but grey clouds cover the sun and a cool breeze whips down the street as he makes his way down the street with forced casualness.

When he turns the corner, Tenzo's arm grabs him by the shoulder and pulls him forward, until they turn into a narrow alley two blocks from the inn.

"Fuck," Kakashi says, letting out a tense breath. "I think he might have made me."

"Did you find anything?" Tenzo asks, frowning with concern at the grim set of the other man's features.

"I think we need to go to the Hokage," Kakashi says slowly, looking up at Tenzo.

It had been a small village. A hamlet, really, a couple dozen houses scattered around a couple communal buildings, set back from the main road. Nestled amidst tall trees waving in the wind, bordering a small lake--it's mundane yet idyllic, indistinguishable from a thousand similar settlements throughout Fire Country.

The people here have spent their whole lives in the same ten-mile radius, with few exceptions. It's the kind of community where roots grow deep, where children grow up and fall and love and have kids of their own, running along the same paths their parents and grandparents had run.

Swaddled by golden fields and faded green-leafed groves, life here is sleepy and lazy, lusty and *real*, vibrant and tangible.

Now the doors on the houses hang open, brown-red splatters and stains soil the ground and streak the walls, and dark forms lay where they fell. Mothers reach for children, lovers cradle each other, and men stare with vacant eyes and expressions of terror.

And sitting in the center of this carnage, amidst the ruin of lives ended and dreams cut short, is a pale man with long black hair, his head tilted and jaw lax as a long tongue slides out and tastes the air.

Orochimaru tastes anguish and grief and *fear*, and it tastes *good*.

Perhaps lesser men, *weaker* men, would quail before this tableau of depravity. Perhaps they'd see the faces twisted with unadulterated horror and feel sick, or avert their eyes from the tangled viscera leaking from bodies.

But there's power in emotion, and Orochimaru revels in it. The dying traces of pain and death taint the air with their delicious coppery-salty taste, and their fear flows into his body, revitalizing his weary limbs.

Because fear is not something to shy away from, no, it's something to consume, something that makes him *stronger*. He feeds on it, feasts on the residual suffering, fuel to the fire. Stolen power crackles through his veins, and a predatory leer twists his colorless, thin lips.

In the days of the Third War, they knew him as dread incarnate. His inhuman, sulfurous eyes, had paralyzed *legions*. His legendary sword, Kusanagi, had carved a bloody path through the Five Elemental Nations. He's the monster in the dark, the name whispered in hushed tones, the architect of fear. And he's only a couple hours away from his destination.

It won't be long now.

Chapter End Notes

I'm making the akatsuki stronger than they are in canon. I want EPIC BOSS BATTLES and that means we need SCARY villains

beta'd by outstorm, who is literally the best person ever

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In the Pouring Rain

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's the *rap-rap* tapping of fat raindrops splattering against the windowpane that rouses Sasuke from his nap. He blinks blearily, wincing at the kink in his neck as he glances at the clock. He can't have been asleep for more than a half-hour.

It's only two o'clock, but his cramped little room is pitch-black. Sasuke gets up gingerly, rolling his shoulders as he walks over to the window. He presses his forehead to the glass, feeling the cool pane vibrate with the impact of stray raindrops as he lets out a long breath.

Sasuke hadn't meant to fall asleep at all, but he hasn't really been in the best state of mind lately. He wouldn't give up spending time with little Naruto for *anything*, but it brings back memories.

Lots of memories.

He grits his teeth, forcing himself to think of *something* else. The movement of raindrops trickling down the glass catches his eye, clear drops against a backdrop of grey-black clouds. A storm looms over the village, an incoming downpour heralded by intermittent drizzling. The towering stormfront extends thousands of feet into the sky, crowned by bright grey-white puffs that remind him of a certain ANBU's fluffy head of silver hair, and Sasuke snorts.

The Kakashi he'd known had been somewhat of a *menace*, dropping out of trees and popping out of alleys to startle and scare the members of Team Seven. And Sasuke has to admit, there's something strangely satisfying about the roles being reversed. He remembers Kakashi hiding in the bar downstairs, looking entirely alarmed and doing a terrible job of concealing it, and he smiles.

Just a bit.

Sasuke pushes off the windowsill, pulling away from the glass as he massages the sore muscles in his neck. He flicks on the desk lamp, sits on the hard, wooden chair, and stares blankly at the wall. It's the first Wednesday of the month, and Naruto wouldn't stop talking all morning about how it's the one day of the month that he gets to visit his beloved Jiji in the evening.

And Sasuke's not jealous. He's *definitely* not, because that would be childish, and he's not a child anymore. That's what he tells himself. He's just a little bored, that's all--

But he wonders who Naruto would rather spend time with if he had to choose between the two.

Sasuke tilts his head back, until he's looking at a misshapen, brown water stain on the ceiling, and suppresses a groan. Alright, fine, he's a *little* jealous. But it's just one evening, and running into the Hokage is only going to raise questions Sasuke would rather not answer. He can stay away for *one* night.

Something occurs to him, and he perks up.

Sasuke's *pretty* good at concealing himself. He could stay out of sight *and* keep an eye on Naruto, and no one would be the wiser. He can't help the sudden thrill of delight that shoots through him at the thought, a small smile spreading over his lips.

Gods, he's so *pathetic*, he can imagine *exactly* what his Naruto would say to him if he saw this. The blond would flash that lopsided smirk, the one reserved only for Sasuke, and reach over--

Knew you couldn't stay away, bastard.

Sasuke grabs his cloak, wrapping it around himself as he hurries out of the room, on his way to Naruto's apartment.

Jiraiya doesn't think he's seen a storm quite like it. The vicious summer squalls common to Fire Country don't hold a candle to the tempest fast approaching; a line of black clouds swallowing the sun and plunging Konoha into darkness. Yellow lights flicker into existence all over the village as drizzling rain and heightening winds rattle against the window of the Hokage's office.

He turns away from the window, and looks upon the very different storm brewing within this very room. While outside, an imminent thunderstorm intensifies, complete with roaring winds and crackling lightning, the storm within the office is a silent one, gale-force emotion swirling around Fugaku Uchiha and his estranged son.

Itachi and his father stand as far away from each other as possible. Between them, looking to and fro with wide, concerned eyes, stands a

very frazzled-looking Shisui Uchiha. Towards the far wall, Inoichi Yamanaka and several other Uchiha police officers hover anxiously.

“Jiraiya,” the Hokage says, interrupting Jiraiya’s wandering thoughts. “Is something wrong?”

Jiraiya shakes his head. His former teacher seems satisfied with that, turning to address the rest of the people assembled in the office.

“Thank you for explaining your plan, Inoichi, and thank you for coming over personally to oversee the memory examination, Fugaku,” the Hokage says.

“Of course,” Fugaku says, his voice impassive as he stares straight ahead, over the Hokage’s shoulder. “The Uchiha are honored that you’ve picked us to help investigate Lord Danzo’s death.”

There’s a moment of silence. Itachi’s perfect composure slips for a moment as his gaze drops to the ground, Shisui scratches his nose to cover the anxious expression that flashes over his face, and the Hokage forces a gentle smile, masking the pained look in his eyes.

“Should we begin?” the Hokage says eventually, and Fugaku offers up a tense nod as he turns to face Shisui.

“Take a breath,” Fugaku says, leaning closer to Shisui. He rests one hand on the young man’s shoulder, feeling the familiar burn in his eyes as he activates his Sharingan. For a moment, his gaze flicks over Shisui’s shoulder to rove over Itachi’s solemn features.

But Itachi hasn’t looked at him *once* since he’d walked into the Hokage’s office.

Fugaku forces himself to look back into Shisui’s eyes, swallowing back the sudden pang of hurt. Shisui lets out a sharp breath, his hands clenching at his sides and his brow furrowing slightly.

“It won’t hurt,” Fugaku murmurs, too softly for anyone besides Shisui to hear, and the younger man seems to relax a little as his own Sharingan swirls into existence. Mesmerizing red-and-black eyes meet each other as Fugaku casts the modified genjutsu.

There were plenty of Uchiha that could have performed the memory retrieval, but Fugaku had quickly decided that he’d do it himself. It’s

not that has any particular desire to catch Danzo's killer--the only thing he'd do with *that* information would be to send the assassin a fucking thank-you note.

But he's known Shisui since the boy was a nightmarishly energetic child, a fearless little menace that was entirely unintimidated by Fugaku's stern demeanor. Shisui's always been there for his son in ways that Fugaku never could be. And maybe Fugaku's an awful father, a failure of a clan leader, but the *least* he can do is protect the boy by doing this himself.

Shisui's eyes grow unfocused and glassy as two of the officers wheel the full-sized, specialized mirror forward. Fugaku glances over at the reflective surface, letting his chakra skitter over it. His own reflection blurs and spins, and then--

Images flash over the mirror with blinding speed, as if it had turned into a window into a parallel world. Memories, *Shisui's* memories, flicker rapidly as Fugaku looks back into the younger man's vacant eyes and navigates through his head.

Keeping the mirror in his field of view, he probes gently. The images that appear are of a field; golden-green grass crunches underfoot as a clear jet of water arcs through the air, and the sound of faint laughter echoes through the room.

Fugaku pushes for an older memory, and the field is replaced with bright lights and fireworks tracing glowing streaks in the night sky, and the muted chattering of excited voices drifts through the air. Fugaku recognizes the scene; the Festival of Fire had happened several months ago.

He can't help but frown slightly. It's not usually this difficult to find a single memory, and it's almost as though something is clouding Shisui's mind. Fugaku lets the individual memories slide away, and starts searching for memories or sensations that seem out-of-place.

It takes a couple minutes of searching through Shisui's sunlit, optimistic mind, but Fugaku finds it. There, amidst playful thoughts and shamelessly cheerful recollections, a chilly fog swirls around a certain set of memories.

The mirror goes blank for a long moment, milky white and opaque. And then, as Fugaku pushes, a new memory begins to play. It happens suddenly, bursting into vibrant color, and everyone in the room watches with rapt attention.

A forest dies, hungry orange flames dozens of feet tall reaching up towards the moon. The crackle and popping of burning trees is almost deafening, embers hissing as they land in the water all around Shisui in the memory. By the lake's edge, the flames fade to nothingness as a black-masked figure steps onto the water.

Jiraiya's gasp is loud enough to break through Fugaku's concentration, and he glances over with annoyance at the white-haired man as the memory freezes and wavers on the mirror.

"Is something wrong, Jiraiya?" the Hokage asks mildly, an eyebrow raised. Jiraiya seems struck entirely speechless, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly as he gestures frantically at the chakra-mirror. It would almost be *comical* if it weren't so obnoxious.

"I know him!" Jiraiya sputters eventually, turning on Fugaku. "Can you examine the memories of someone who doesn't possess the Sharingan?"

"Sometimes," Fugaku says, frowning. "It's a lot harder, and you'll need to focus on it--"

"Do it," Jiraiya says, stepping closer to him. Fugaku narrows his eyes, but the Hokage clears his throat before Fugaku can refuse.

"Can you humor him? Please?" he says, rubbing his forehead wearily with one hand. Fugaku's jaw tenses, until it's almost *painful*, but he slowly ends the modified genjutsu he'd casted on Shisui, turning to face Jiraiya.

From the corner of his eye, he sees Itachi reach for a now-disoriented Shisui, worry and concern and care breaking through his son's facade. But he ignores the confused tangle of emotion, pushing it down until the only things he can see are Jiraiya's dark eyes locked on his.

"Empty your mind and think only of the memory you want to show us," Fugaku says, and then he casts the genjutsu.

The memories are murky, washed-out, not preserved as well as those of a Sharingan-user. Fugaku avoids wandering; Jiraiya has a *reputation*, and he has no desire to examine the wanton depths of the man's mind. Instead, he waits for the object of Jiraiya's focus to surface.

The first image that appears on the surface of the specialized mirror beside him is a wooden shelf. Details begin to appear, with agonizing

slowness. There are racks bearing clothing articles, a couple people moving amongst rows of merchandise, a shelf bearing a half-dozen different masks.

Fugaku's mouth twists into an exasperated grimace as he realizes that Jiraiya had interrupted them to show everyone a damn *clothing store*.

Then a shape appears in the middle of the image, a black stain flowing over the golden-hued wood and bright lightning. It resolves into the shape of a man. And while the background is a little fuzzy, the details slightly blurred by Jiraiya's imperfect recollection--

There's nothing fuzzy, nothing hazy about this man. He has short, choppy black hair and a face that Fugaku can *swear* he's seen before. A make-shift eye patch made of ragged, torn cloth covers half his face, and his one dark eye is ringed by even darker circles. He looks pale and exhausted, but he flashes Jiraiya a lopsided smirk as he holds something out in his hand.

He's holding the mask Danzo's killer wore.

The rain's *really* starting to come down now. Sheets of icy water smash into the face of Hokage Tower as Kakashi runs up the side, and Tenzo is barely visible next to him except for when bright staccato flashes of lightning illuminate the murky dark.

Kakashi's mask is just as soaked and freezing as the rest of his clothes, sticking to his nose and mouth and making it difficult to draw breath. But he ignores the burning in his chest, endures the ache pulsing through his body, and channels warm chakra into his muscles as the two of them ascend

Maybe some other time, Tenzo would have griped about how Kakashi's habit of entering the Hokage's office via the window was ridiculous and embarrassing. Kakashi never contested that fact; it certainly *was* ridiculous, and he had no idea why the Hokage continued to humor him. But as he *finally* reaches the unlocked, rain-slick window of the Hokage office and pushes it open, he's fervently glad that the man *does* humor him.

The metal windowsill is slippery and wet, and Kakashi nearly falls over as he barges into the office. He doesn't hesitate, doesn't think, doesn't so much as *pause* before he grabs the back of the Hokage's chair and whirls it around, already babbling.

“There’s an enemy infiltrator in the village stalking Naruto and he’s in danger--”

“Kakashi?” the Hokage says, too bewildered to even reprimand the younger man. “I--what? Naruto is in danger?”

“Yes!” Kakashi says, slowing down. “There’s an enemy ninja stalking him, and--”

Tenzo very pointedly clears his throat, and Kakashi looks up. The office isn’t empty, like he had first thought. A couple of sour-faced Uchiha police officers stand by the far wall, a blond man in a rumpled Intelligence uniform looks absolutely *startled*, Shisui and Itachi are staring at him like he’s mad, and a *royally* pissed-off Fugaku Uchiha is glaring at him.

Kakashi doesn’t really register the presence of these people, though, because there’s a full-color projection of the stranger in the middle of the room.

“That’s him,” he says, pointing at the mirror. “That’s the man who’s been hanging around Naruto.”

More and more frequently, Hiruzen is reminded of just how badly he’s failed the village. It’s becoming a regular occurrence at this point, a fact that he can’t stop thinking about as he stares numbly at water dripping off Kakashi’s clothes and pooling on the floor beneath him.

“You’re sure of this? This man--” Hiruzen says, gesturing to the specialized mirror, still frozen on the still image of the one-eyed man, “he’s the one you saw?”

“Yes, Lord Hokage,” Tenzo says. His face is pinched with a grim expression, a look that Hiruzen’s not entirely accustomed to seeing on the man. “Captain Hatake and I tracked him to an inn on the west side of town where he’s been staying. At least one of the employees there is under a genjutsu, but we’re not sure who else is being manipulated by him.”

“Back to what I was asking earlier,” Inoichi Yamanaka says, looking at Jiraiya. “You helped this man enter the village?”

“He had the chakra signature of a civilian!” Jiraiya says, a little defensively. “How was I supposed to know he was--”

“You--”

“Enough!” Hiruzen says firmly, cutting through the din. The room falls silent, a dozen pairs of eyes landing on him as he stands up. This isn’t another political intrigue or diplomatic incident. *This* is something Hiruzen can handle; a conflict, a crisis.

“Where is the assassin right now? At the inn?” Hiruzen asks Tenzo, getting a mute nod in response. “ANBU Team Ro will go to Naruto Uzumaki’s apartment and bring the boy back here, where we can keep him safe. Fugaku, go back to the Police Headquarters and gather all the officers you can. Once Naruto is here, Jiraiya and I will join you and bring this assassin in for questioning.”

The air is filled with anxious murmurs of assent, and everyone starts moving at once. The members of Team Ro are the first to leave, with Kakashi dragging Shisui and Itachi out the door. They’re followed by the Fugaku and the rest of the Uchiha police officers, until the only person left besides himself and Jiraiya is an anxious Inoichi Yamanaka.

“Is there anything I can do, Lord Hokage?” he asks, and Hiruzen closes his eyes.

“Go tell the ANBU commander to come here at once. I want ANBU teams deployed throughout the village,” Hiruzen says, and Inoichi scurries out of the room. It’s quiet for a little bit, a silence broken only by the splatter of rain against the windows behind him.

“Shouldn’t we head out?” Jiraiya says. Hiruzen sighs, opening his eyes and staring at his desk.

“We can leave once Team Ro brings Naruto back here,” Hiruzen says. He hesitates for a moment, the lines of his face growing more severe as he turns to look out the window.

“If something happens to the boy,” he says to Jiraiya, “I don’t know how I’ll live with myself.”

“Will he go back to living alone, after we catch the intruder?” Jiraiya asks.

“No. Things will be different now--”

Strobing, violet light flashes from the floor-length windows, bright enough to hurt Hiruzen’s eyes as he quickly looks away. It’s

accompanied by a surge of crackling power, a shuddering swell of *malice* that makes his heart beat faster than it has in years. When the flashing fades, replaced by a steadfast mauve glow, he looks outside.

“A barrier?” Hiruzen murmurs, glancing over at Jiraiya. His former student seems frozen in place.

“Sarutobi-sensei...” Jiraiya says slowly. There’s an odd note in his voice, and he’s staring out the window with a strange mixture of alarm and wonder and *longing*. “Do you feel that?”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he says, watching the purple-hued dome envelop the Hokage Tower. No reply comes from the still forms slumped around the guard post, but then again, he wasn’t really expecting one.

Dead men don’t talk, after all.

They lay around him, a half-dozen ninja in Konoha flak jackets, dreams and aspirations reduced to stiffening corpses and limp flesh. There are no wounds; he had slain them with nothing more than a glance.

Leaves scattered before the storm.

His hair is soaked, thick black ropes trailing down his back and over his face. Eyes of brimstone bulge out in maniacal glee, and he lets loose a booming laugh that echoes down the empty streets. And with one fluid motion, he steps over the threshold, through the massive gates, and enters the village.

The rain intensifies, lashing down with reborn fury. The sky shakes with the rumbling roar of thunder, and the white flashes of lightning reflect off the water pooling in the flooded streets. But no matter how hard the rain comes down, no matter how loudly thunder rings, it can’t quite drown out his deranged cackling.

Orochimaru walks through Konoha once more.

Chapter End Notes

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Architect of Fear

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Searing bright purple light, the smell of ozone and burning wood, a static crackle that makes his mouth taste like metal and his skin nettle--

Kakashi drops to a crouch, tanto drawn, staring with alarm at the glowing barrier blocking the street. Shisui yelps in surprise, nearly falling over, and Itachi and Tenzo adopt matching expressions of wariness as they draw their own weapons.

“It’s a dome,” Itachi murmurs, pointing upwards. Kakashi follows the gesture with narrowed eyes, ignoring the raindrops that splatter across his face, watching the strange violet light wrap around the Hokage Tower.

“Is it a barrier?” he asks. Tenzo forms several quick hand signs, and the wet cobblestones crack open as vines burst forth to skitter uselessly across the glowing purple wall.

“It’s a barrier,” Tenzo confirms, a frown on his face as he looks around. “It’s not dangerous or anything, but I’m guessing no one can enter or leave Hokage Tower.”

“Did anyone else make it out in time?” Shisui asks, pushing wet hair out of his eyes and looking down the deserted, rain-slicked street. “Should one of us go to the Police Headquarters and warn them?”

“I don’t know,” Tenzo says

“We’re the only ones outside the barrier who know about Danzo’s killer,” Itachi says, dark eyes wide with alarm as they flick to meet Kakashi’s gaze. “Does the assassin know he’s been exposed?”

Kakashi remembers how the stranger had paused in the inn lobby, and his blood runs cold.

“We need to get to Naruto *right now*,” he says.

The curtains in Naruto's apartment are ratty and coarse under Sasuke's fingertips as he tugs them aside, frowning as he sees the glowing barrier surrounding the Hokage Tower, far in the distance. His left hand tightens its grasp on the windowsill, knuckles turning white, and he senses something bitter in the air--

"Naruto?" he asks quietly. There's no reply, no sound but the groan of the cheap apartment building swaying in the gale-force wind and the lashing of furious rainfall against the window.

"Naruto!" he says, louder, as he moves towards the bedroom. There's a whimper, a cowed sound of terror, and he sees a blond head of hair on the floor beside the bed. Just a minute ago, everything had been fine; now the lights flicker, and tears trace shining lines down the boy's face as Sasuke crouches down.

He can feel it now, the roiling waves of cruel malice and strangely-familiar fear slipping through the gap under the door and from the vents. It's greasy and dark, a casual malevolence that raises goosebumps on his skin and makes Naruto curl up even tighter.

Sasuke's not one to show affection, so he's not sure where the instinct to wrap his arms around Naruto comes from--

But he doesn't stop himself, feathery golden hair tickling his chin and cheek as he gathers the trembling boy in his arms, coming together in an embrace that's firm and warm and steady.

And it's probably just his imagination, but for a moment, the murk of the darkened apartment recedes for just a moment.

"It's alright. I'm here," he murmurs, a little awkwardly, because only two people have *ever* seen this side of him. Naruto snuffles, but he's not actively sobbing anymore, which Sasuke takes to mean that he's doing *something* right here.

There's something awful happening outside. But Sasuke can't quite bring himself to care about that right now, not when Naruto's arms find their way around his neck and Naruto's tears leave a damp spot on his shirt.

Konoha can deal with its problems by itself for one night.

Their sandals splash in ankle-deep pools of water as they run through

the flooded streets. Kakashi's in the lead, frantic urgency buoying his stamina as he races over the slick cobblestones at a dead sprint. He knows, in the back of his mind, that the rest of his team is behind him. He can't see them, but he hears their heavy breathing and the splatter of their footsteps in the water underfoot.

And there's something else.

Fear. Not just fear though--*panic*, all-consuming and overwhelming, and it takes every last bit of his discipline and training to not freeze up right in the middle of the street. It's getting stronger as they draw near Naruto's shitty apartment building, a compulsion building in his limbs to turn tail and *run*.

He turns a corner, skidding slightly over the slippery stone, nearly gasping with relief as Naruto's building *finally* comes into view. The lights on the whole block are out, and there's only a single street lamp flickering tenuously. And under the unsteady light, flashing in and out of focus in the rain, is a man.

Far off, the village's alarm sirens go off, the piercing wail harmonizing with the howl of the vicious wind. The man tilts his head, listening to the haunting cacophony, and then slowly turns to face Team Ro.

Long, wet black hair is plastered to his face, cascading down his shoulders like a shroud; a dripping black robe emblazoned with red clouds hangs off his body. And when Kakashi looks into those glowing yellow eyes, sulfurous eyes that shine like beacons through the dark, his heart starts to race.

The tiny picture in the Bingo Book could never do this man justice, could never convey the way his mere *presence* makes Kakashi's clenched fists tremble, the way the man's eyes stop him from so much as *breathing*.

Orochimaru's mouth twists with a wide smile that resembles a gash, and a long tongue flicks out to taste the air. When he speaks, his voice is rich and sibilant, effortlessly burying its hooks into Kakashi's mind.

"What do we have here?" he says, a look of manic delight playing over his pale face.

There's a certain simplicity to combat. It doesn't matter that Itachi's own family hates him, it doesn't matter that he betrayed his clan, it

doesn't matter that he ruins everything good in his life except for Shisui--

No, the only thing that matters right now is that there's a child in danger, and an enemy to be defeated. For just a moment, the entirety of the world boils down to just this, and Itachi *craves* it, craves how conflict cuts through everything else.

There's no hesitation from the members of Team Ro, not in the face of such a deadly adversary. Orochimaru is infamous, *legendary*--he's the notorious Snake Sage, one of the legendary Sannin of the Leaf, a man with no qualms and ruthless genius. Weapons are drawn in the blink of an eye, the four of them advancing warily down the street.

And Orochimaru hasn't *stopped* grinning, a horrific expression as the lipless mouth stretches wide and exposes jagged, needle-like teeth, and he lets out a satisfied sigh as he reaches both arms out, palms facing the rain-laden clouds far above them. His eyes bulge out, snakelike pupils dilating.

"*Stop*," he says, his voice distorted and deep, as if it were coming from a dozen throats.

The next thing Itachi knows is that he's on all fours, no idea where his weapon went, staring at the rainwater flowing between cobblestones inches from his nose as he gasps for breath. It feels like he's been punched repeatedly in the gut; he can barely stop himself from retching, and his heartbeat is a pounding drum that makes his head throb.

Itachi can tell it's a genjutsu, but he's never felt one this *strong*. It takes every ounce of control he has to activate his Sharingan, forcing chakra into his eyes and struggling to dispel the illusion. He takes solace in the burning sensation in his eyes, letting it ground him. Itachi glances up.

A couple feet away, Tenzo lays on his side, facing him. The brown-haired man is curled into a ball, eyes bloodshot and wide as he shakes uncontrollably. To Itachi's right, Shisui slowly gets to his feet, his eyes a furious shade of scarlet and mouth set in a determined line. Kakashi retches violently, something splattering as it hits the cobblestones, but then he's standing up too, his one Sharingan open.

"Such beautiful eyes," Orochimaru says. The man hasn't moved, his arms still spread as he watches the three Sharingan-users struggle to their feet. "It's a pity I'm not here for those at the moment."

“Surrender,” Kakashi says, his voice surprisingly steady as he picks up blade and points it at Orochimaru. “You’re outnumbered and outmatched, and the Hokage will be here soon. Surrender, and you won’t come to any harm.”

“Come stop me,” Orochimaru replies with a mocking sneer, dropping his arms to his sides. “Go ahead. I’ll even let you get a free hit in.”

Kakashi glances in Shisui’s direction, and Itachi feels his best friend’s chakra flare as he *moves*. Shisui’s body-flicker is so instantaneous, so perfectly executed, that Itachi’s eyes can’t even register the movement until Shisui reaches his destination.

Orochimaru wheezes, blood spraying out of his mouth and over the pale skin of his chin. Shisui twists the tanto that’s embedded hilt-deep in the other man’s chest, the unyielding steel no doubt ripping Orochimaru’s heart to shreds.

And then the wheeze turns to a wet, gurgling chuckle as Orochimaru *laughs*, flecks of pink flying from his lips and dark red gushing from his chest and mixing with the water at his feet. Shisui looks startled, and he doesn’t even see Orochimaru’s hand moving until he’s picked up and *thrown* through the air, soaring ten meters before slamming into a storefront with the crashing clatter of shattering glass.

He doesn’t get up.

Orochimaru’s fingers, ghostly-pale and streaked with his own blood, wrap around the hilt of the tanto and pull it free from his body, medallions of blood falling free. Before the torrential rain can wash the blade clean, he runs his long tongue over the stained metal, eyes drifting closed as he tastes his own blood.

Itachi sees the clear, tacky gel-like substance Orochimaru’s tongue leaves behind; with his Sharingan, he can see the saliva has been infused with chakra.

“Some sort of toxin,” Kakashi mutters to him, having noticed the same thing Itachi had. Itachi acknowledges his remark with a terse nod, fighting the urge to go back and check on Shisui. He’s a former ANBU, a *warrior*, and he knows the best way to help his comrades is to stay focused.

They’ve worked together for years, the two of them, so when Kakashi lets lightning crackle over his body and charges in, Itachi knows to lay down covering fire. His fingers move through a half-dozen signs,

impossibly fast, and streamers of white-hot fire burn through the rainstorm, sizzling steam swirling and rising.

Orochimaru doesn't even bother *looking* at Itachi's jutsu, simply waving his hand. The streets explode, chunks of earth rising up into a makeshift barrier that Itachi's flames sputter and die out against.

In the sudden darkness following the disappearance of his fire jutsu, Itachi can't quite see what happens next. But through the sound of the rain crashing into rooftops, he hears a wet crunch and a pained gasp, and Kakashi's body flies out of the dark to land, very neatly, at his feet.

Two yellow eyes gleam, twin flames piercing through the murk. In the flashing flicker of the single street lamp, Itachi sees snapshots of pure chaos. He can see the blood dripping from Kakashi's broken nose, soiling the man's silver hair. He can see Orochimaru shambling forward, grabbing a loose flap of flesh hanging out of his stab wound and shoving it back inside his own body.

And he sees an Uchiha fan, emblazoned on the back of a jacket, as a man steps between him and Orochimaru. The newcomer looks over his shoulder, and Itachi finds himself staring into familiar dark eyes.

"Stay back, Itachi," Fugaku says, his gaze softening for a moment. "Make sure your teammates are okay."

Chapter End Notes

everyone go listen to Red (Taylor's Version) because Taylor is stunning and iconic and the album is gas

All Too Well (10 Minute Version) is like... the only thing in my head right now

beta'd by outstorm

twitter: [@baja_heaux](https://twitter.com/baja_heaux)

Let Loose the Winds of Hell

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mikoto meets him at the door, cradling their son, her dark eyes sparkling with mirth. Fugaku opens his mouth, about to ask what's going on, but she shakes his head before he can say anything.

"You missed it," she says, nudging him inside with her free.

"Missed what? Did something happen?" Fugaku asks, entirely confused as he shrugs off his Konoha Police uniform jacket. But Mikoto just smiles, taking a couple steps back and crouching on the ground. Fugaku watches with an expression of complete bewilderment as she lowers their son to the ground.

"Papa!" Itachi yells with unrestrained glee, his big-doe eyes wide as he lets out a delighted cackle and stumble-staggers towards his father. And for a second, Fugaku is too utterly dumbstruck to do anything more than stare between his year-old son and his wife in disbelief, because that's little Itachi, and he's walking. He's fucking walking, and--

"I missed his first steps?" he repeats, absolutely crestfallen, and Mikoto laughs.

"The first couple, yes," she says, pushing Fugaku's windswept bangs off his forehead. "But you'll be here for the next thousand, so there's no point moping, is there?"

And that's a good point, something he hadn't quite thought of before, so Fugaku cracks a wide smile in the dim light of the foyer, scooping his son into his arms. His heart thrums with pride and wonder and love, so much love, and he lets out a breathless laugh as he hugs his son tight. There's one truth, undeniable and unchanging, evident in this moment and forever preserved in his memories--

Fugaku Uchiha loves his son more than anything else in the world.

The faltering street lamp finally gives out, tenuous yellow light replaced by inky black and radiant-white lightning flashes. A half-dozen meters away, eyes of brimstone shine through the pouring rain,

a caustic gaze locked on him with unsettling intensity.

Fugaku Uchiha faces down the darkness.

He knows that he's no match for Orochimaru. It's a simple, unavoidable fact.

Behind him, Itachi is dragging his incapacitated comrades out of harm's way. There will be no help from Team Ro, not right now. In the apartment building down the street, he can sense the nine-tails' vessel hiding. But the jinchuuriki is a mere child, untrained, and so there's no help from that quarter either.

But off in the distance, a group of familiar, fiery chakra signatures are approaching quickly from the direction of the Uchiha district. So he's calm, even though he realizes that he can't win this fight by himself. Because he's an Uchiha, and Uchiha *never* have to fight alone.

All he has to do is stall.

He's been in the icy rain for a while now, long enough for frigid water to soak through his uniform and drench his hair. But Fugaku's not cold, not when there's a firestorm brewing just under the surface of his heated skin.

Dark eyes turn red as he activates his Sharingan, and time slows down. A quick exhale, a flare of chakra--

Fugaku's lips drip with flames as his blazing breath paints a banner of furious color, flowing rapidly between the rain-lashed storefronts. He sees Orochimaru move, red-black robes and pale skin blurring with motion as the other man dodges.

Orochimaru slashes an arm down vertically, and Fugaku looks up as blades of air, laced with chakra hiss towards him. It's his turn to dodge, hurling himself forward as the wind-jutsu rips into the wooden building behind him. A thousand splinters hang in the air.

His fingers flash as Fugaku forms a couple hand signs, and a fireball the size of a house streaks towards his adversary, a furious gust tugging at the hem of Fugaku's cloak as the inferno sucks all the air from the street.

But Orochimaru holds up a fist, and the rain cascading around them coalesces into a wall of water, sweeping towards Fugaku with dizzying speed, crashing into the fireball with a *boom* that makes the glass

windows of the buildings rattle.

A cloud of scalding steam expands rapidly, and Fugaku charges *into* it, right through it, ignoring the stinging burn spreading over his skin. Volcanic chakra fuels his explosive motion as he slams a palm against Orochimaru's torso with such force that an audible *crack* rings out. But Orochimaru doesn't even flinch, he just--

He just looks at Fugaku and flashes a sickening *smile*.

Agonizing pain blooms over Fugaku's shoulders, over his arms, over his neck, and he stumbles back. His Sharingan eyes glance upwards in time to realize that rain isn't coming down anymore. It's not coming down anymore, because *every single* drop of rain above him has been frozen solid, shaped into needles of chakra-infused ice that rip through his uniform and stab into his muscles.

A shield of white-blue flame sears its way into existence above him, vaporizing the incoming projectiles as Fugaku lets out a pained gasp. Orochimaru watches him with an amused smirk, licking his lips as he brings his hands together.

"You've gotten soft," Orochimaru says. "What, did you think a bonfire would be enough to stop me?"

The ground beneath him trembles, and Fugaku *feels* the jutsu churning under the road beneath him even as the deadly tines of ice hammer down into his fire-shield. There's only a split-second to react, to do the impossible, to somehow avoid *both* attacks.

The clattering racket of rain splashing on tiled roofs, the rumble of thunder thrumming through the sky, the whistle of wind whipping through narrow streets--all these noises are drowned out by a new one.

The deep roar and blinding-bright of a newborn conflagration, a tornado formed entirely of fire, makes the air shake.

A cyclone, a whirling maelstrom made entirely of billowing flame, blossoms like some sort of infernal flower. Fugaku blasts himself ten, twenty, thirty meters up, riding the column of fire; the air grows unbearably hot, rain and ice alike turning to steam as he scrunches his eyes shut against the sudden, dazzling illumination.

Jagged shards of rock and earth burst through the cobblestones where Fugaku had stood just a moment ago. But Orochimaru's jutsu can't

reach Fugaku, not when he hangs in the sky like a brilliant, radiant sun.

And when Fugaku opens his eyes again, his irises are overlaid with black pinwheels.

Pain, burning and crackling and red-hot, flares in his eyes and stabs through his body with savage intensity. Fugaku grits his teeth against the throbbing ache.

He hasn't used his Mangekyou Sharingan's power in years, not since the days of the Great War, when Konoha faced invasion. But he can still remember the way it felt back then, the way the power pools in his eyes and bloody tears start to drip down his face, the way his head throbs with an unbearable ache and his mouth goes dry.

"Takeminakata," he whispers.

The winds of hell.

That's what they call it the day after, when the Leaf Village reinforcements arrive at the battlefield. They walk through fields of Iwagakure corpses, awestruck at the burned and charred bodies. The Great War has been brutal, but they've never seen anything like this--

Then they come upon the survivors, a half-dozen Konoha ninja covered in ash and soot and dirt and blood, stinking of burnt flesh and filth. When the survivors are asked what happened here, they point at the man in the corner.

Fugaku Uchiha cradles his brother's body with exaggerated care, as if his gentleness could somehow bring him back. Dried, bloody tear-tracks mar Fugaku's handsome face as his hands tremble, black pinwheels spinning wildly in his eyes as he looks up.

"I couldn't save him," Fugaku says, over and over, a heartbroken refrain repeated until the words don't make sense anymore.

"He burned them alive," the other survivors say, warily and with no small amount of fear. "He called forth the winds of hell and burned them all..."

Fugaku's bloody gaze falls upon Orochimaru's face, and the air begins

to shimmer. Torrential rainfall pauses, flash-boiled into wisps of steam. The yellow-eyed man pauses, head tilted, a frown on his face, not quite realizing what's coming--

And then a gout of air, heated until it almost seems to *glow*, envelops the man whole. There's a garbled scream, a blue-white flash of chakra, a screeching noise as cobblestones blacken and crack.

The stench of burned meat fills the air, and Fugaku almost retches.

The air cools and the rainfall resumes with a vengeance, extinguishing the scattered flames and plunging the battlefield back into darkness. The cool water splashes over Fugaku's upturned face as he lets out a shaky breath.

His eyes are fixed on the unmoving lump a dozen meters in front of him. *It can't be*, he thinks, fighting back exhausted relief and fragile hope. *Is he dead?*

Orochimaru is one of the greatest ninja to ever have come from the Leaf Village, renowned throughout the world for his genius. There's no way Fugaku could have defeated the man, not even with his Mangekyou, it's--

The lump twitches, Orochimaru chuckles, and Fugaku takes a step back out of sheer shock.

Orochimaru's body is charred, *ruined*, skin and muscle burned away until bone shows here and there, his thick cloak reduced to scorched tatters. But even as Fugaku watches in disturbed silence, the walking corpse before him mends itself. Blackened flesh flakes away to reveal new, pinkish skin; long hair grows out to replace what Fugaku has burned away. Orochimaru stretches languorously.

"Impressive," he concedes. "I never thought I would see that with my own eyes."

Fugaku doesn't bother responding, because time's up. A dozen blue-uniformed Uchiha police officers drop down from the smoldering ceilings, their red eyes glowing, and Fugaku crosses his arms as he smirks at Orochimaru.

"It's over," he says.

"It certainly is," Orochimaru replies, looking around lazily. "As *amusing* as this has been, I *do* have a job to do."

Orochimaru tilts his head back, eyes closed, breathing in slowly. The world shivers.

Fugaku *gapes*, stupefied, as chakra gushes into the yellow-eyed man's body. It's ripped from the trees lining the streets around them; stolen from the hundreds of people cowering in the surrounding buildings; leeched from the thunderstorm raging above. In the span of a couple seconds, Orochimaru's body absorbs so much ambient chakra that Fugaku wonders how the man doesn't spontaneously combust on the spot.

Sulfurous eyes slide open slowly, drunk on power, and when Orochimaru speaks again, his voice echoes and reverberates.

"Sleep."

Now Fugaku's on all fours, head spinning, muscles frozen up. His body won't *move*, his limbs stubbornly ignoring his efforts to *move*, to get up and *fight*. At the edge of his field of view, he can see Uchiha police officers slumping to the ground, senseless. The burning in his eyes intensifies as he activates his Mangekyou Sharingan again, but the genjutsu still holds him fast.

"How is this possible?" Fugaku says, struggling to force the words out. Orochimaru studies him with a strange look on his sallow face, then shakes his head.

"An excellent question. I don't know why you're still awake, either," he says, the mocking smile spreading over his lips again. "But it doesn't seem like you can move right now, can you?"

"Y--you--" Fugaku manages to say, before his jaw clamps shut. He can't even look up from the ground as Orochimaru laughs quietly, walking away from him.

"I do hope we meet again," the rogue ninja says, his voice growing fainter. "I'm always looking for new test subjects. But for now, I have something I need to do..."

It's the last thing Fugaku hears before everything fades to shades of gauzy gray and swirling black.

Orochimaru taps the apartment door with a finger, and the wood fragments into jagged splinters as it explodes inwards. His tongue

flicks out for a split-second, and he can *taste* the young jinchuuriki's paralyzing fear.

But there's a hint of something else too, something that tastes like ash and lightning and *anger*--

He frowns as he steps over the threshold, into the child's apartment. The lights are out in this building and the window across from him is shattered. Wind and rain lash through the room, and flashes of lightning illuminate the messy room.

But Orochimaru doesn't really take notice of *any* of this, because there's a tall, dark-haired man standing in the middle of the living room, glaring at him with mismatched eyes of purple and red.

"You scared him," the stranger says, his fists clenching. "You'll *never* do that again."

Chapter End Notes

i was reading this other fic, and the author was like... apologizing for cliffhangers and sticking to a release schedule for posting.

Meanwhile, I spit out a chapter whenever I'm able to shake myself out of the depressed haze, and compulsively write cliffhangers into everything. I'm so sorry y'all have to deal with me D:

I can't stress how much this fic relies on outstarm beta'ing it. She's the most amazing person every and we love her for it.

twitter: [@baja_heaux](#)

Fire and Brimstone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Red.

Burning, furious, *hellacious* red; everything Sasuke sees is tinged with it, dripping with it, soaked a bloody shade of crimson. His hands are shaking, *trembling* with the anger he can't control--

All he can think about is the frightened little boy hiding behind him, unshed tears of terror clouding his twinkling blue eyes and sobs wracking his tiny frame. And Sasuke's been angry before, he's been infuriated, but he's never felt quite like *this*.

There's a storm outside, but Sasuke can't hear it over the dull roar filling his ears, a bloodthirsty, outraged howl that leaves his mind empty of anything but the desire to maim, to hurt, to *kill*--

"Who are you?" Orochimaru asks, tilting his head slightly. An expression that's something between a smirk and a leer stretches his lipless mouth, exposing sharp, needle-like teeth. An involuntary spasm runs the length of Sasuke's body as he grits his teeth, grinding them together until it *hurts*.

"Flee," Orochimaru says, waving dismissively as he picks at the scraps of the tattered, burnt robe clinging to his body. "I'm only here for the vessel. I might even spare you, if you run now."

Sasuke's going to kill him. He's going to *fucking* kill him, even if it means *ripping* Orochimaru's body into ten thousand bloody pieces with his bare fingers, even if it means immolating the entire city block and incinerating a hundred civilians alongside the wretched snake.

Sasuke will let the world burn before Orochimaru lays a *single finger* on Naruto.

So he lifts a hand, fingers outstretched, palm facing across the room, and speaks in a soft voice that shakes with unrestrained fury.

"Almighty Push."

This had once been a city block.

There had been a half-dozen seedy apartment buildings, a dilapidated laundromat, a cheap restaurant with tacky neon signs that had flickered on-and-off all hours of the night--

Now those structures are nothing more than debris clouds and splinters scattered like matchsticks, shattered ruins interspersed with the wounded and dying, the broken bones of a city laid bare.

The apartment building where little Naruto Uzumaki lives has been neatly cut in half, cross-sectioned interior floors and buildings laid opened up to the raging elements, the southern wing blasted away cleanly. Sasuke stands in the middle of the third floor, wet hair slicked back and scanning the devastation with a glowing red eye.

He feels Naruto's chakra shudder behind him with another wave of paralyzing, dazing fear, and he spares a glance over his shoulder at the bedroom door. Two instincts clash briefly, like titanic waves slamming into each other in the recesses of Sasuke's mind; the desire to stay close and safeguard the boy, and the urge to sprint through the rain and brutally hack Orochimaru to pieces.

But Sasuke barely has a choice, not when apocalyptic rage and pitch-black hatred make his heart race and force his hand. There's no option here, not really, not when someone wants to hurt Naruto. Sasuke's lost a lot, he's lost so much, he's lost his whole world in the span of a couple cruel weeks, and he--

He *refuses* to lose this too.

It only takes a moment for him to wrap a couple hasty wards around Naruto's small body, cocooning the boy in protective golden light. *I'll be back*, he wants to promise, but words can't quite escape past the lump in his throat.

So Sasuke lets his Sharingan fade away, dropping ten meters to land soundlessly amidst rain-slicked debris and foundations cracked open, and slowly walks towards his quarry.

Caution, restraint, control--

These are alien concepts to Sasuke right now, empty words that mean nothing, *less* than nothing. He's walking down what had once been a street, oblivious to the chaos around him, his eyes locked on something squirming on the ground ahead.

Orochimaru's body, a sack of flesh shaken till every bone had been ground to dust, lays in a pool of dark red that the torrential rain already has begun to wash away, writhing and thrashing. Sasuke can hear the squelching of it pushing itself back into its normal shape, the cracking crunch of bones mending and limbs snapping back into position, the wet pops of vertebrae realigning.

Orochimaru stands up, flashing a delighted smile as his burst eyeballs re-inflate and regain their glowing yellow irises.

"You're not like the others," Orochimaru purrs. "You're different. You're *interesting*."

Sasuke scowls fiercely, his voice cracking with the sheer hate pressed into each word--

"You made him *cry*," he spits out. "I'm going to kill you."

"Greater men than you have tried," Orochimaru replies, taking in a deep breath and holding a palm out. "And all have failed. Now..."

Sasuke feels Orochimaru's chakra swell like a monstrous tidal wave looming over the coast, a surge of crackling malevolence that raises goosebumps on his wet skin. The killing intent radiating from the yellow-eyed man intensifies, cresting, fuelling a genjutsu of absolutely magnificent magnitude and crushing scope.

"*Kneel*," Orochimaru hisses, a triumphant smirk on his face.

Fear, pure and unadulterated, cascades through Sasuke's body, festering in the forgotten reaches and pushing slowly to the forefront, *demanding* his compliance, attempting to force his body to freeze and obey the snake's command--

And it could have worked, too. Five years ago, when Sasuke was ruled by his fear, enslaved to it, it *would* have worked. He'd been a fearful little boy; terrified of what his brother had done and guilty of loving Itachi regardless; afraid of what would be left if he gave up his mindless pursuit of vengeance; scared of how Naruto could break through his walls and make him *feel* again.

Five years ago, he would have slumped to the ground, dazed and senseless, helpless and entirely subservient to Orochimaru's will. But it's been a long five years since then, and there's one truth that even the pain of losing his whole world can't be stripped from Sasuke. Fear had been choking, suffocating, immobilizing to him once--

But Sasuke broke the last of his shackles a long, long time ago.

He stretches languorously in the freezing rain, his own fiery chakra coursing through his veins and staving off the chill. A ferocious smile plays over his lips, and he opens his Rinnegan. Orochimaru balks, shocked.

“Fear’s an old friend,” Sasuke says easily, reaching out. “Universal Pull.”

Orochimaru’s body hurtles towards him, caught in the Rinnegan’s inexorable force, and Sasuke slams a fist limned with flames through the man’s chest with a bone-breaking impact. Crimson guts and pale white skin and sharp fragments of bone fly out, spattering across the wet ground and over Sasuke’s chest and face, and he revels in just how tangible, how *real* it all is.

Then he’s thrusting Orochimaru away, watching the body trail streamers of red as it lands with a crunch far away.

This time, when Orochimaru’s body mends itself and the man stands back up, there’s no hint of arrogance or hubris in his intent gaze. And watching that sure confidence disappear, watching Orochimaru realize *just how fucked* he really is, it’s something Sasuke will *never* get enough of--

Sasuke laughs, dragging hands still-festooned with viscera and gore through his hair, howling with mirth as blood and rain mingle and drip down his face, tasting iron as he licks his lips.

“The *great* Orochimaru,” he says breathlessly, shaking with laughter. “Nothing but a punching-bag...”

A violent tremor rocks Orochimaru’s torso, rolling up from his stomach and through his neck, making his head bob. It happens again, then a third time, increasing its speed and frequency, until the man hunches over with a series of gurgling, hacking coughs. Sasuke tilts his head to the side, watching curiously.

With a final rasping gag, Orochimaru yanks a leather-wrapped hilt from between his jaws, a sword slowly emerging from his mouth. It’s covered with with bodily fluids, the cold glittering luster of the blade muted, but Sasuke would recognize *this* particular blade anywhere--

Long black hair, soaked and dripping, cascades down Orochimaru’s head and shoulders as he holds the Sword of Kusanagi aloft, letting

the rain wash away the filth coating it. Dead, glowing yellow eyes twinkle through the dark.

“I haven’t had to use this since the war,” Orochimaru muses, twirling the blade. “But it’s not everyday I fight someone with the *Rinnegan*, is it?”

And then he vanishes.

He’s *fast*, faster than a striking cobra, a blur barely visible in the dark, and Sasuke doesn’t have time to activate his Sharingan, doesn’t have time to do anything but hurl himself backwards out of pure instinct.

The Sword of Kusanagi slashes through the air, the tip of the blade nicking the cloth of Sasuke’s shirt. Sasuke’s head snaps up, breath and chakra mixing between his lips, and he breathes out yellow-orange *fire*.

But Orochimaru’s already looping the blade back for a second savage slash, and the flames sputter out, leaving nothing but swirling steam and deadly steel behind. There’s no *time*, no chance to do anything but narrowly dodge under Orochimaru’s arm, coming up behind the yellow-eyed man.

Sasuke’s behind Orochimaru now, out of striking range, buying himself a precious second to cast one of the Rinnegan’s jutsu--

With a loud crack, Orochimaru’s right shoulder dislocates itself as it bends at an unnatural angle, bones breaking and tendons ripping as the Sword of Kusanagi *very* nearly takes off Sasuke’s head. He’s stumbling backwards, dodging narrowly as Orochimaru twists and contorts and rips his body to attack from new and inventive angles, faintly-glowing metal rending the air.

Then one strike flashes forth, faster than even *Sasuke* can evade, and he knows he can’t hold back any longer. There’s no avoiding what comes next, because there’s only one way to stop Orochimaru’s blade from gutting him in the next couple of moments--

Sasuke’s Sharingan swirls into brilliant, radiant red-and-black existence, and agonizing purple flames flicker over his skin.

For the first time, Orochimaru is shocked into slack-jawed silence, frozen, staring with utter disbelief at the ethereal flames blocking the path of his sword mere inches from Sasuke’s skin.

“Impossible,” he murmurs, sulfurous eyes flicking up to meet Sasuke’s mismatched gaze. “What *are* you?”

And now Sasuke has a moment to breathe, a moment to gather himself, a moment to truly and completely let loose, consequences-be-damned, because Orochimaru dies *today*--

“Amaterasu,” he growls, and burning whorls of inky-black bloom over Orochimaru’s bloodstained form.

Heat so intense that rain turns to steam and Sasuke’s skin nettles, the stench of scorched human flesh and hair, the frenzied keening of a man being burnt alive; Sasuke registers all of this with grim satisfaction, watching Orochimaru fall, convulsing, to the ground. For a long minute, the eternal flames of Sasuke’s Amaterasu elicit animal howls from the man.

But then the wailing gives way to soft chuckling, barely audible over the popping hiss of black flames burning in the rain, over the sound of flesh boiling and bubbling, and Orochimaru’s body shivers. The mouth unhinges, the jaw bones snapping and fracturing as the lipless maw gapes open.

Bones snap and fracture as Orochimaru’s jaw unhinges, the lipless maw opening wider and wider and wider until Sasuke can see something *wriggling* inside--

And like a snake shedding its old skin, Orochimaru emerges from the mouth of his old body, slick with fluid, naked pale skin and grotesque, bulging muscle on full display. Sasuke lets his Amaterasu flicker out of existence as Orochimaru rolls his neck experimentally.

“I haven’t had to do that before,” he says to Sasuke, wiping some of the fluid covering his body off his forehead and out of his eyes. “But this is over now.”

The world blurs.

From all around them, ambient chakra rushes into Orochimaru’s body like a storm surge preceding a hurricane. Sasuke can feel the man ripping chakra out of the bodies of the hundreds of terrified civilians around them, leeching energy from the storm raging above them, harnessing strength from the land and the air--

Cold, aching fatigue sweeps through Sasuke’s limbs as Orochimaru’s jutsu drains the chakra from his body, until his straining muscles give

out and he lands on all fours, palms pressed against the wet, cracked cobblestone.

In the dark, in the midst of the pouring rain and flashing lightning and gale-force wind, Orochimaru shines with poached power and stolen radiance. In the vast cosmos, Orochimaru is a supernova; a single roaring explosion of such magnitude, such majesty, such raw power, that all who look upon him are blinded by his brilliance. His chakra flares so brightly that Sasuke screws his Sharingan shut, blinking away its afterimage.

“None can stand before me,” Orochimaru breathes, his skin almost *glowing* from all the stolen chakra roiling under its surface.

Head bowed, shoulders hunched, breathing ragged--Sasuke stares at the raindrops splattering across the dark stone under his pale fingers, water dripping through hair caked with congealed blood. But his lips twist and his face contorts, and the grin that spreads over his face is maniacal, deranged, *unhinged*--

Because if Orochimaru is the scintillating supernova, the gleam of brilliance that lights up the darkness with golden glamor--

Then Sasuke is the singularity, the inexorable force, the black hole that *nothing*, not even light, can escape.

So Sasuke opens his Rinnegan, daring to stare straight into the light, and absorbs the chakra straight out of Orochimaru's body. One moment, Orochimaru floats a meter in the air, intoxicated by the head-rush of power crackling through him. The next, he's flat on his back, barely able to even move. He looks up, stricken, shocked, *startled*--

One hand reaching towards the sky, Sasuke lets out a breath. And then *all* that stolen power, every last trace of the chakra he just absorbed, is launched skyward in a blast of white light.

It's almost over.

Sasuke can feel it in his bones, alongside the numbing exhaustion and chilling fear. Far above, silhouetted against the backdrop of black storm clouds, Itachi watches his. His older brother's eyes are dripping blood, and Itachi's expression is as inscrutable as ever.

Sasuke knows he doesn't have any chakra left. His hands are trembling with exhaustion, his chest burns when he draws breath, and he can barely keep his Sharingan activated without doubling over in pain.

But he's not out of tricks yet.

There is one last card left to play, one last chance to kill the man who had torn their family apart. With an air of finality, Sasuke reaches for the sky with a shaking hand. This is the weapon he's been saving all along, the greatest lightning-style technique ever created--

This is Sasuke's Kirin.

The sky turns blue white, the air shakes with a concussive rumble, and Itachi glances up, caught completely off-guard. Sasuke taps into the power of the tempest, and he can feel it.

It's almost over.

The storm folds in on itself, clouds rotating and picking up speed. The occasional rumble and flash of thunder and lightning heightens, intensifies, until the rumbling roar of constant thunder becomes a percussion, a monstrous heartbeat to the jutsu forming above—

The scream of air and chakra swirling above becomes almost unbearable, and Sasuke grins as pain skewers and throbs through his eardrums. Far above, light blazes into existence. Nestled amongst the clouds, a new sun is born. It's made of pure lightning, condensed into a sphere, crackling so loudly that Sasuke's teeth shake with its vibrations.

The battlefield is painted with harsh, stark white light as Orochimaru crawls away, desperation flashing over his sallow features. Sasuke ignores him, feeding the lightning-storm. The sky is replaced with nothing but blinding, dazzling white light, and the ground begins to shake with such violence that Sasuke feels as though his own body is about to come apart at the joints, and it feels *good*.

Orochimaru's slashing himself open with a dagger, dragging his fingertips through his bloody abdomen, frantically painting a crude seal on the floor. Sasuke watches him lazily, smiling slightly as his hair begins to stand on end and the taste of metal fills his mouth.

Then, with a wave of his hand, Sasuke releases the Kirin.

In the split-second before impact, Orochimaru finishes his seal and presses his palm to it. There's a swirl of black smoke, a wrinkle in space, and then the yellow-eyed man is gone. Then a beam of light, so intensely bright that its color is impossible to discern, slams into the ground.

And for a short time, the world ceases to exist.

Chapter End Notes

"To Be Loved" by Adele is STUNNING, my sleep schedule sucks, and i want to wish all my american readers a very happy thanksgiving!

beta'd by outstorm

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Picking Up the Pieces

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The purple barrier crackles loudly, vanishing with a deafening snap of static. In its absence, the world seems a little dimmer, a little less bright, and a wave of freezing water splatters over Jiraiya's face as rain begins to come down again. He blinks in surprise, staring at the now-empty street.

"I didn't do that," he says, glancing over his shoulder. The expressions of the four ANBU guards behind him are inscrutable behind their masks, but they carry themselves with a faint air of urgency--and also exasperation. One of them, wearing a mask in the likeness of an otter, tilts her head as she looks around.

"The barrier around the Hokage Tower is down," she says. "I can't sense it anymore. Should we--"

And then a sudden light flashes, so bright as to be actively *painful*, and Jiraiya screws his eyes shut to avoid the sudden burning, lancing sting. Heat washes over him, nipping at exposed skin and drawing a startled gasp from the ANBU behind him. A couple seconds later, a dull boom rattles the windows around them and shakes Jiraiya's bones.

He opens his eyes cautiously.

A faint wind picks up, blowing over his wet forehead as he stares in utter disbelief at the burgeoning mushroom cloud flowering over the South End of Konoha. The hellish afterglow of the blast fades out slowly, and the tableau of devastation is lost to inky darkness. But even though the scene is lost to his eyes, Jiraiya knows the memory is etched indelibly into his mind.

"Go tell the Hokage the barrier is down," he says to the ANBU, a grim expression on his face. "And tell him I'm going after Orochimaru."

Like a cresting wave breaking over, dashing itself against the shore with unrestrained fury before collapsing in on itself, the storm raging above begins to die out. It's as though his Kirin had drained the last of

its energy, and now the spent thunderclouds begin to dissipate. Amidst the smoke and dust, Sasuke closes his eyes and lets out a sigh.

He fucked *up*.

Orochimaru undoubtedly escaped, and the Akatsuki will soon know of Sasuke's existence. He *also* just blew his cover, along with destroying a chunk of the village. But that's not even the worst part--

The worst feeling is knowing that little Naruto came very, very close to being captured and killed. Sasuke had been too caught up in playing house, too mesmerized by his second chance at a life here, and Naruto almost died for it.

He opens his eyes and looks up at the sky, watching how the storm swirls away and thins out. Through the gaps in the clouds, he can catch glimpses of twinkling stars and moonlight. He lets out a slow breath. It's clear to him now.

Sasuke has to take Naruto, and leave the Leaf Village.

The Akatsuki have started to hunt jinchuuriki years earlier than they had in Sasuke's time. Konoha, for all its ninja and all its power, cannot protect Naruto, and keeping the boy here will only make him an easy target. Until Sasuke can hunt down each and every Akatsuki member, until he can reduce them to ash and bits of charred bone, Naruto will *never* be safe.

It's settled, then. They'll leave tonight and be gone by daybreak.

Moonlight gilds the rising pall of smoke with a silver lining as Sasuke turns and slowly makes his way back to Naruto's apartment building.

Kakashi awakens with a strangled yelp as he feels a sudden, stabbing pain radiating from the middle of his face. There's a disgusting squelching, snapping sound, and he sits straight up--

"Watch it!" Tenzo hisses, jerking backwards to avoid Kakashi's head slamming into his face, a green glow emanating from his fingertips. "I'm trying to fix your ugly mug, don't headbutt me--"

Kakashi touches his nose gingerly. There's globs of drying, congealing blood, but it doesn't really hurt anymore.

“Thanks,” he says, looking around. They’re in a clothing store, from the looks of it, and he sees Itachi and Shisui kneeling behind a rack of women’s shirts. The plate glass window facing the street is shattered, riven into dozens of gleaming shards, and the gentle pattering of rain echoes through the darkened store.

“Where’s Orochimaru?” Kakashi asks Itachi.

“A group of police officers arrived and engaged him in combat once you were incapacitated. I moved the three of you here,” Itachi replies, frowning as he shakes his head. “There was some kind of genjutsu cast after that, so I don’t know what happened next. I just woke up.”

“I’m one big bruise,” Shisui groans, rubbing the back of his head. He shoots a baleful glare at Tenzo. “Nice of you to wake up, flower boy.”

“I wasn’t *asleep*,” Tenzo says mildly. “I was under a genjutsu. Like you were a minute ago, remember?”

Kakashi tunes out their bickering, scenting the air. He can smell the acrid, bitter scent of smoke, the earthy tang of fresh rainfall--and the faint, coppery-metallic odor of blood. He clenches his fists tight, fingernails digging into the skin of his palms.

Naruto.

“We have to complete our mission,” Kakashi says, grimacing slightly as he stands on sore legs. There’s a cut on his left leg that he hadn’t noticed, and it’s with a slight limp that Kakashi walks out of the building and into the street.

He blinks, mouth hanging open in surprise.

Half of Naruto’s building is just... *gone*, ripped away, blasted into oblivion. Beyond the apartment building is a wide expanse of splintered and snapped walls, gouged-up earth, and scattered cobblestones. A whole neighborhood lays in pieces, and the fading thunderclouds let ghostly silver-white moonlight shine over the wreckage.

And rising above it all, in the background, hovering over the village like a specter of doom and ruin, is a mushroom cloud. Its blossoming head catches the dim light as it expands slowly, silently, and he can see a hundred small fires catching and spreading.

It takes every last bit of discipline on Kakashi’s part not to panic, to

stay calm and level-headed as he reaches out with his senses, stuffing his shaking hands into his pockets and letting out a deep breath as he searches for Naruto's chakra signature--

He almost whoops with relief as he finds it, tucked into the building ahead of him. He's safe. He's *fine*.

"Look," Tenzo murmurs, pointing. Kakashi glances further down the street, noticing a dozen figures in dark blue uniforms getting to their feet. Even from a distance, he can see the Uchiha fan emblazoned on the backs of their high-collared shirts.

As the four of them jog down the street, Kakashi can hear his teammates reacting to the chaos around them. Shisui is stunned into speechlessness--*that's* a first--and Tenzo inhales sharply.

"This... *what* happened here?" Itachi asks, sounding almost awestruck.

The Uchiha are still waking up slowly when Team Ro reaches them. To the side, rising from where he'd been crouching next to one of his unconscious clansmen, Fugaku Uchiha clears his throat.

"Hatake. Is your team... operational?" he asks. His face is streaked with soot, and he smells like burnt hair.

"Yes, sir," Kakashi says. It's the truth--while he has an *unbearably* bad headache, and his teammates are battered and bruised, these are only minor injuries for ANBU, and certainly not incapacitating ones. He takes another long breath in, cataloging the dozens of different scents hanging in the air, confirming his suspicions. "We encountered the rogue-nin Orochimaru on our way to retrieve the nine-tails' vessel, but I can't detect him anymore."

Fugaku activates his Sharingan, slowly sweeping his gaze over everything. Kakashi takes a moment to sneak a glance at the apartment building. He remembers that Naruto's apartment is on the third floor, closer to the north facade, which means--

"I don't see his chakra anymore," Fugaku says, frowning. "Orochimaru is gone."

"Is Naruto alright?" Kakashi blurts out. Fugaku looks at him for a moment, something softening in his eyes, before he shakes his head.

"We just woke up, I was just about to check on the boy," he says. He gestures towards the wrecked building. "Go check on him. I'll have

some of my deputies conduct a sweep and secure this location.”

“Right. Of course,” Kakashi says, already moving towards Naruto’s building. He pauses, for a moment, then adds quietly, “Thank you.”

Fugaku just gives him a little nod, turning around to address one of the officers. Kakashi doesn’t wait for his team, nervous anticipation getting the best of him as he strides over the debris-strewn street--

“Actually, Hatake,” Fugaku says suddenly, an edge creeping into his voice. Kakashi glances over his shoulder, puzzled.

“Take the child to the Hokage Tower,” Fugaku says, his swirling red eyes slightly unfocused as he stares off into the distance. “He’ll be safer there.”

“Is it a good idea to move him right now?” one of the Uchiha asks, looking between Fugaku and the apartment building. “We could wait for the ANBU to reinforce us--”

“There’s something coming,” Fugaku interrupts, speaking softly. “Hatake. Take the boy, *now*.”

Kakashi doesn’t need to be told twice; he’s alright darting up the side of the apartment building, urgency lending him renewed vigor. Something buzzes at the very edge of Kakashi’s awareness, something that flashes like lightning and tastes like ashes and smells like smoke.

He has to get Naruto out of here.

The tempest that mere hours earlier had flooded the streets with torrential rainfall is nothing but a memory now; were it not for his damp uniform and the water dripping down the side of buildings and ruins, Fugaku wouldn’t have even known it had happened.

The night is deceptively calm now, a gentle breeze rushing through the air, and even through the clouds of debris, he can see the hazy white glow of the full moon shining. But Fugaku’s stomach churns with nerves as he watches smoke and dust slowly clear, and his red eyes are fixed on the glowing presence moving towards him.

He’s never felt, never seen anything like it before.

There’s something about it that’s almost *familiar*, something he feels

like he's felt before. But it's shot through with strains of wild, roaring power, fused with an alien, coursing current that thrums and shudders. Staring at it is like staring into a sun, and his eyes throb with every heartbeat. It doesn't even seem *human* anymore, now that he can really see it.

Before such resplendent grandeur, Fugaku suddenly realizes how insignificant, how *inconsequential* he is.

A gust of air whips down the street, clearing the haze away and raising goosebumps on Fugaku's skin in between the gaps of his uniform. Around him, the other Uchiha form a loose half-circle, warily activating their Sharingan.

And there, perched atop a craggy outcropping of stone, stands the man from Shisui's memories; the one-eyed assassin who had slain Danzo Shimura. He's frozen in surprise, a stricken look on his face as he stares down at Fugaku, his jaw hanging open.

He's so *young*, barely out of his teens, and the wide-eyed shock on his face makes the stranger look younger still. And his *face*--

Now that Fugaku's seeing him in person, he's struck by the stranger's resemblance to Itachi. The silky black hair, the angular features, the pale skin...

They could almost be *brothers*.

But there's no mistaking the fact that this young man is the source of the blinding, otherworldly power. There's no mistaking the fact that this young man is dangerous. So Fugaku clears his throat and steps forward, palm raised and pointed at the stranger.

"You're under arrest," he calls out. "Come quietly, and we won't hurt you."

Chapter End Notes

i really am sorry for how slow i'm updating, finals are really cutting into my writing time :(

only a couple days until i can just go back to eating garbage food and writing literally all day, so there's that to look forward to

beta'd by outstorm

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Run Away With Me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A dozen pairs of red-and-black eyes bore into Sasuke. They're the eyes of ghosts, of people Sasuke hasn't seen in over ten years. They're the eyes of the dead.

He sees Yakumi, who'd given him a little hawk whittled from a piece of driftwood when Sasuke was a little boy. He sees Itsuki, who'd run past Sasuke's window every day like clockwork on his morning jogs, whistling a merry tune. He sees Hiroto, who'd fed the stray cats wandering through the Uchiha district with a gentle smile on his face.

And in the front, standing tall and proud, Sasuke sees his father.

Fugaku Uchiha: living *legend*, war hero, head of the famed Uchiha--

Sasuke doesn't care much for people, and cares even less for what people think of him. But his father had always been the exception to that rule. He remembers training until his knuckles dripped with blood, hoping for just a nod of acknowledgement; he remembers listening at the door to the office when his father would talk to Itachi, daydreaming of when it would be *Sasuke* in there instead.

Fugaku had been larger-than-life, a presence looming over everything Sasuke had ever done as a child.

But when he looks at his father now, there are things he never noticed before that he sees now. He's shorter than Sasuke remembers, and behind his stern expression are laugh lines that he doesn't recall being there. There are dark circles under his eyes, and a handful of silver hairs mixed into the black. When he looks at his father now, Sasuke sees the man behind the myth. And losing that *mystique*, that blind adoration--

"Put your hands up," Fugaku calls out, stepping forward warily. Sasuke snaps out of his daze, blinking furiously as his eyes sting with sudden wetness.

Fucking *feelings*.

He focuses for a moment, reaching out with his awareness to scan his

surroundings. He can't exactly use his Sharingan here, not in front of a dozen Uchiha, so he's going to have to resort to doing things the old-fashioned way. Something feels off, though, as if something's different.

Then Sasuke realizes that Naruto is *not in his apartment building*, and his heart skips a beat.

The warm-sun-glow of Naruto's chakra, as familiar to him as his own, is nowhere to be found. The building smolders with the dull chakra signatures of perhaps thirty civilians, but there's nothing there that would indicate that Naruto is still there--

"Where is he?" Sasuke says, desperation creeping into his voice. "He's not safe, *where did you take him--*"

"I'm only going to ask one more time," his father replies, red eyes narrowed. "Surrender."

Sasuke screws his eyes shut, reaching out as far as his awareness can go. He senses chaos, the rising fear and hysteria of hundreds, thousands of civilians. He senses the disciplined, bright signatures of ANBU and jonin rushing towards him. And in the distance, halfway to the Hokage Tower and moving quickly, he senses Naruto's presence.

They're taking him away.

Even with his eyes shut, Sasuke can feel the chakra of the Uchiha around him flare. The street heats up, and Sasuke opens eyes to find a wall of swirling flames circling around him, drawing nearer, drying his damp clothes and sending waves of prickling discomfort over the skin of his face and neck.

The Rinnegan sucks in the fire, snatching it out of the air until the only thing that remains is a flickering afterimage. The eye glows a furious shade of violet.

"Get out of my way," Sasuke says, his voice low and urgent and just a little pleading, because there's no *time--*

The Uchiha police are far too disciplined to be caught off guard by an opponent displaying an unexpected power, and they scatter up and down the street, forcing him to divert his attention as they surround him. Sasuke glances at his father again, shaking his head.

"Just *stop*," he says, already knowing it won't work.

The Uchiha charge as one, faster than the eye can see, and they fall upon Sasuke like a swarm of bloodthirsty gnats.

Flaming fists, crackling discharges, flashing steel--Sasuke evades them all, twisting his body, jumping and ducking. He lets his chakra bleed into the cracked cobblestones, and stone liquefies underfoot. In the blink of an eye, five of the Uchiha are neck-deep in the earth, and Sasuke solidifies the ground around them.

He only has a split-second warning before spears of flame and smoke hiss through the air, nearly skewering him. Sasuke lands in an awkward crouch, smoke rising from the hem of his cloak, staring with complete surprise at Fugaku.

What the *fuck* was that?

Sword-wielding Uchiha jump down from the rooftops on either side of him, matching snarls playing over pale faces. Sasuke doesn't spare them a glance, summoning water from thin air. With a clashing roar, a ten-foot-tall wave courses and crashes down the street, sweeping away the officers. Sasuke freezes them in thick ice with a wave of his hand.

Fugaku and two of the Uchiha are the only ones quick enough to escape, perched atop the canted side of a ruined storefront. Sasuke narrows his eyes.

And with a *pop* of displaced air, he swaps places with one of the Uchiha.

Sasuke slams a fist into the other officer's jaw, sending the man sprawling with a snapping jolt of static electricity. Fugaku tries to flip backwards, away from him, but Sasuke grabs him by the collar and pulls him back. Fugaku's Sharingan isn't active anymore, and his startled dark eyes meet Sasuke's gaze, and he can't--Sasuke can't--

How can he hit his own father?

Fugaku's hands clamp onto Sasuke's biceps, holding him in place, and Sasuke's too shaken to break free.

White-hot, hissing, sizzling, crackling agony pulses through his body as Fugaku electrocutes him. Sasuke's teeth clamp shut on his tongue, and he tastes blood and metal, and he can't stop his muscles from contracting and clenching.

He lands in the exposed dirt between chunks of masonry, convulsions

wracking his limbs, eyes shut, unable to so much as breathe for a second.

“*Shit*,” he rasps out eventually. “That stings.”

Sasuke does his best to scramble to his feet as Fugaku moves towards him, almost faceplanting as his trembling arms give out under him. He stands steadily enough, swaying just a bit, wincing at the anguish snapping and jolting through his muscles.

That fucking *hurt*, and not in the good way.

But before they can resume their duel, Fugaku’s eyes widen as he stares at something behind Sasuke, and Sasuke spins around just in time to catch a palm-strike, wheezing as it slams into his chest. He sees a mane of wild, white hair--

Sasuke staggers back, gasping for breath like a fish out of water, lashing out with a reflexive punch. Jiraiya rolls with the impact, landing on his feet and watching Sasuke with deadly intent. The white-haired man holds up a hand, and snaps his fingers.

Sasuke’s chakra fizzles out, the vision in his Rinnegan going dark and the steady stream of energy reinforcing his muscles fading to nothing. He lands in the dirt, on his knees, staring down at where Jiraiya’s hand had made contact with his chest.

Burned through the fabric of his cloak and shirt, a glowing green seal pulses against Sasuke’s skin.

That *fucker*.

“That’s enough, Juugo,” Jiraiya says. There’s a clicking noise as Fugaku pulls out a pair of chakra-blocking handcuffs moving behind Sasuke and out of his immediate vision. And all he can do is silently seethe, paralyzed, imagining Naruto slipping further and further away from him.

He didn’t want to do this.

He *tried*, he really *did*, but--

But if it’s a choice between staying undetected, or keeping Naruto safe, well, that’s not much of a choice at all.

A different kind of pain burns through Sasuke now, a soothing

smolder that spreads through him until every cell of his body, every fiber of his being throbs in unison. The cold seal locking away his chakra gives, just a bit.

Sasuke's right eye spins into the elaborate pattern of his Mangekyou Sharingan, and a dull purple light glows from his skin. For the briefest of moments, he catches the bewildered expression on Jiraiya's face, and then the world dissolves into the shades of a shifting lavender inferno.

Spectral bones, both ethereal and terrible at once, coalesce into existence, ribs curving protectively around Sasuke's body, and a ghastly grinning skull manifests in the sky, staring down with empty, desolate eyes.

Sasuke's Susanoo is only half formed, and yet it flattens entire city blocks as it lashes out with its arms. The ghostly entity mirrors Sasuke's own motions as he pressed his palms to the scorched, blasted ground. There's a sudden surge of unrestrained chakra, destructive potential let loose with reckless abandon.

And for the second time that night, an explosion rocks the village, and a pall of smoke climbs into the night sky under the silver gaze of the full moon.

Desperate, frustrated, furious *anger* washes over Kakashi, a metallic impression that leaves a bitter tang in the air and makes his heart skip a beat. It's not his own emotion; it's as though someone has *broadcast* the feeling, shouting it so loudly that it rings through the streets of the village.

The flash of violet light comes from behind them, and the exposed skin on the nape of Kakashi's neck stings with sudden heat. The noise comes a second later, a dull *boom* that reverberates through the air and makes the windows around them rattle in their frames. He can't help but pause, still carrying an unconscious Naruto in his arms as he glances over his shoulder.

A purple glow fades out slowly, gradually, and a swirling plume of smoke pushes its way into the night sky, interspersed with flecks of flame.

"*That* doesn't look good," Shisui says, scratching the back of his head. Tenzo and Itachi are mirroring each other, tense statues with grim-set

jaws and hands resting on the hilts of their weapons as they stare off into the distance. Kakashi sighs.

“We can’t go back,” he reminds them, shifting Naruto’s sleeping body to a more comfortable position. The boy’s cheek is pressed against his chest, dirt and grime and tear tracks smeared over his little face, and Kakashi forces himself to look away. “We have our task.”

“I know,” Itachi says, quietly, letting his hand drop to his side. “Sorry. I just--my father--”

“He’ll be fine. He’s too scary to get hurt,” Shisui says, reaching over and poking Itachi’s cheek. “C’mon. We’ll go back for him after.”

A wind picks up, sending stray leaves and trash skittering down the cobblestones and ruffling through Kakashi’s hair. And when he looks towards the South End again, he sees *something* massive moving inside the smoke and dust, luminous and ethereal.

“I think we better keep moving,” Tenzo says, taking a couple steps back and growing a few shades paler. Kakashi steals one last look at Naruto’s face, feeling his warm breath through the thin fabric of his shirt, spellbound at how good it feels to finally be able to touch, to *hold* Minato’s son. Then he glances towards the Hokage Tower, estimating distances in his head.

Five minutes. That’s all they need. Then Naruto will be safe, the smoke will settle and the chaos will subside, and things will be fine. Five minutes.

The first ANBU team that tries to stop him bursts from the street, shards of treated stone flung skyward as they burrow out of the ground. Sasuke sends them sprawling with the sweep of a spectral arm, with the splintering of wooden buildings cracking open and the hissing of bricks being scorched black.

These streets are narrow, so he reigns his Susanoo in. It’s barely-there, nothing more than a skeletal entity that holds him aloft in the air, charging down towards his quarry with frightful speed.

The second ANBU team attacks from the rooftops, from the buildings that come up to his Susanoo’s waist. Fire jutsu splash red-orange fury over his purple armor, a brilliant frisson of kaleidoscopic color that lights up the night sky briefly. He barely spares them a glance, putting

them to sleep with a Rinnegan-empowered genjutsu.

Now he's rushing through the eastern half of the Merchant Quarter, where the streets are congested and winding. He lets his Susanoo fade in intensity, until it's a ghostly, flickering fire that limns and lines his limbs with violet light.

Four ANBU spring forth from an abandoned fruit vendor's darkened stall, surrounding him. In the span of a single heartbeat, he sends them crashing to the ground with a flash of static electricity. They twitch slightly, paralyzed, as he disappears down the street.

He can feel Naruto up ahead. The boy's chakra signature is a beacon; a warm, steady pulse of energy that feels like *home*. It's muted, as if Naruto's asleep, and it's moving towards the Hokage Tower *very* quickly.

Sasuke just happens to be quicker.

He accelerates until the streets turn into a blur of black and gray, yellow street lights flashing intermittently. The wind whips over his face, a cold rush that feels *amazing* as it soothes the red, blotchy blush on his cheeks borne from fighting multiple fire-jutsu users. Naruto is just up this alley now, a couple dozen feet away, surrounded by four tense, familiar presences.

Sasuke materializes out of thin air like a phantom, appearing in the midst of Team Ro with a swirl of crackling air. Itachi and Shisui whirl to face him, eyes glowing crimson red, and Sasuke ignores the little pang in his chest as he uses the Rinnegan to plunge into the Wood Release user's mind.

He casts a simple illusion, papering his own appearance over Itachi and Shisui, then takes a quick step back.

Shisui and Itachi move with blinding speed, drawing their weapons. But before they can run Sasuke through with their blades, thick vines burst from between the cobblestones underfoot to wrap around their arms and legs, their own teammate's attack immobilizing them.

Sasuke blasts the three of them into unconsciousness with a blue-white discharge of electricity, tasting metal as a wave of heat breaks over him.

He can sense Kakashi moving away from him, *still* trying to head towards the Administrative District. Sasuke gives the building next to

him an appraising once-over, tracking Kakashi's movement behind the edifice. He reaches out with one hand.

"Universal Pull."

Kakashi's barreling down a dusty, narrow alleyway when the world explodes.

He instinctively curls himself around Naruto's little body, arms wrapped tight around the boy as they go sailing through the air, caught in an invisible force. Chunks of shredded wood and shards of pulverized brick rain down around them, and Kakashi closes his eyes to avoid the debris-laden gale that swallows him up.

He lands on the ground with surprising gentleness, somehow cushioned by the destructive wind that had just obliterated a city block. He hears soft footsteps, and warily opens his normal eye.

The stranger Kakashi had been stalking looks down at him, one iris swirling with the unmistakable black-and-red of the Sharingan, while the other glows a brilliant shade of purple. Violet *flames* lick the man's clothes, charring the ground beneath his feet and illuminating the billowing clouds of dust around them.

For a long moment, Kakashi and the stranger stare at each other. Kakashi is dazed and winded, unable to do much more than tighten his embrace around Naruto, and flickers of emotion pass over the young stranger's face.

Then the stranger reaches out, fingers pressing against Kakashi's cheek, and liquid fire gushes through Kakashi's whole body as paralyzing lightning chakra is pushed through his muscles. His body grows slack, and he lets out a pained gasp as his vision flickers and gives out.

Naruto sleeps fitfully, the after effects of Orochimaru's reckless mass-genjutsu keeping him under. Sasuke brushes the bangs off of the boy's forehead, dispelling any last trace of foreign interference.

Then he waits, Naruto's head cradled in his lap.

Perhaps a minute later, baby-blue eyes open blearily and stare up at

him, and Sasuke's heart skips a beat. Again.

"Hello," he says, and then he winces internally at how underwhelming *that* sounds.

"Juugo?" Naruto's face scrunches up as he scowls, rubbing at his eyes with his fists. "My head hurts..."

"It'll get better," Sasuke murmurs, wiping away a streak of dirt along the bridge of Naruto's nose. "Are you hurt?"

"I-I don't, uh, no," Naruto replies, shaking his head slightly. "I can't remember anything."

It's probably for the best, Sasuke muses, glancing over his shoulder at Kakashi's limp form. He frowns slightly, gaze unfocused as he senses the half-dozen ANBU squads converging on their location.

"I have to leave the village," Sasuke says abruptly. Naruto gives him a wide-eyed look of shock, grabbing Sasuke's sleeve.

"No! You can't leave," he says, tugging on Sasuke's shirt pathetically. "You're--no one else even *talks* to me. Except for Jiji, but I only see him once a month!"

Sasuke blinks with confusion.

"No, I, uh, wanted you to come with me. We leave together," he explains slowly. "I--do you want to come with me?"

"Yeah!" Naruto exclaims, loud enough that Sasuke's ears ring. "Yeah--I do!"

"I won't ever leave you," Sasuke says softly. "Not unless you want me to."

"You promise you won't?" Naruto replies, letting go of Sasuke's sleeve and letting his hand drop to his side. He's still staring at Sasuke with unsettling intensity, but Sasuke just reaches out and gently pokes his forehead.

"Never. I can explain later, but we have to go *now*, Naruto," Sasuke says, standing and pulling the boy to his feet. "There are people who want to separate us, and they're coming."

"I don't want you to go," Naruto says immediately, catching one of Sasuke's hands between his own and squeezing.

“Then we have to go now,” Sasuke says. “Do you trust me?”

“Mhm!” Naruto replies, nodding with vigorous enthusiasm. Sasuke hides a smile as he loops an arm under Naruto’s knees and another under the boy’s shoulders, easily lifting him up.

“Don’t freak out,” he says, opening his Rinnegan. The look of fascinated wonder on Naruto’s face as he stares at Sasuke’s eye is slightly distracting, so Sasuke opts to stare at the dull glow of the moon instead, faintly visible through the curtains of rising airborne dust.

The debris and wrecked building materials around him begin to float first, rising slowly into the air and revolving languorously, as though gravity no longer exists. Then heavier objects begin to float too; a chair drifts skyward, followed by a large chunk of masonry.

Sasuke’s feet leave the ground, his hair swirling around his head as they rise into the sky. He hears Naruto’s awestruck gasp, and he doesn’t bother hiding his smile this time.

“Hold on tight,” he reminds Naruto as they hover forty feet above the ground. He gets a nod in response, small arms latching on to him.

And then Sasuke takes flight, into the still night sky and away from the smoke-shrouded village, slipping the surly bonds of the earth as if he meant to touch the very face of the moon itself.

Chapter End Notes

My finals are FINALLY over!! See what I did there? As a side note, if anyone is thinking of taking Bankruptcy Law, I’m here to tell you to NEVER do it. Taking that class was a mistake and the final was an absolute mess, and I’m a clown.

But anyway, I’m really excited to post this chapter! This marks the conclusion of one of the big narrative arcs me and outstorn planned for this fic, and the start of a new one. This was the "Orochimaru Arc", which we came up with while I was eating my way through a pint of ice cream back in October. The next arc is one of my favorites--but I can't spoil it for y'all right now, so I suppose we'll just have to wait and see :D

I adapted a little snippet from the poem “High Flight” in this chapter, so those beautiful words are not mine (though I wish they were).

Happy Holidays to everyone!

twitter: [@baja_heaux](https://twitter.com/baja_heaux)

The New War

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The upper curve of the rising sun finally breaches the dark expanse of the horizon, cresting over faraway trees to cast its warm-toned light across the sleeping earth. Sasuke watches in silence, the faint chirping of little songbirds and the cool morning breeze breaking over him as sunlit splotches bloom over the grass around him.

Naruto snuffles in his sleep, shifting in Sasuke's lap. He'd fallen asleep in Sasuke's arm just after they'd crossed the Naka River, and Sasuke had flown a little while longer before deciding to take a little break.

The smell of smoke still clings to Sasuke's clothes, and Orochimaru's dried blood flakes off his skin where the rain hadn't washed it off. Naruto hasn't fared much better; golden hair is streaked with dull gray, and Sasuke wrinkles his nose a little at the smell coming off the two of them.

Both of them need a *bath*.

Slipping his hands under Naruto's body, Sasuke gently gathers him up in his arms again, walking through the thigh-high vegetation. He can hear the gentle burbling of water coming from amidst the copse of birch and oak trees ahead, at the foot of this hill.

The western expanses of Fire Country are filled with these gently rolling hills cloaked in tall, green-and-gold grass that dries out under the summer sun and rustles in the wind. Streams and brooks crisscross the landscape, lined with stately deciduous trees.

His Naruto had loved this place, back when it was just the two of them on the run together, back when Sasuke was merely a cluster of jagged nerves and anger in the shape of a person, back when the world was nothing but open blue skies and open blue eyes. If Sasuke closes his eyes, lets the heat of the sunlight soak into his chest and the rushing of wind over dry leaves fill his ears, he can almost *see* it--

"Wanna go swimming?" Naruto asks, yanking on Sasuke's arm with a typical disregard for personal space. Sasuke skewers him with the most unimpressed glower he can muster, tugging his arm free from Naruto's grip.

"I thought we had people to save," Sasuke grumbles eventually, because the blond is immune to his glares.

"C'mon..." Naruto manages to make even a sigh sound whiny. "We've been running for days now, I'm all sweaty and hot. Let's take a break."

Sasuke groans.

Five minutes later, he's standing at the edge of a shallow creek, and he doesn't recall how he got here. Clear water courses over dark gray gravel, and the air is filled with Naruto's whoops of joy and unrestrained cackling as the idiot wrestles and plays with his own clones.

"Sasuke!" one of the clones--or the real Naruto, he honestly can't tell right now--yells out. "The water's so cool! Come on in!"

"You're a child," Sasuke shoots back, crossing his arms. One of the Naruto-clones wades out of the water, flashing a smarmy grin and running a wet finger along Sasuke's collar.

"What, is the big bad Uchiha afraid of a little water?" he says, and Sasuke grits his teeth. This one has to be the real Naruto, no one else would be that fucking annoying--

"I'll electrocute you," Sasuke mutters, but they both know it's an empty threat.

The clone leans a little closer, and Sasuke's eyes can't help wandering, skimming down tanned skin and rippling muscle on full display, festooned with gleaming drops of water that sparkle in the sun peeking through the foliage. He breathes in sharply as the clone's hand brushes his jaw--

There's no warning before another clone shoves him from behind, straight into the creek. Sasuke crashes into the clone in front of him, dispelling it into a cloud of smoke, and falls face-first into the freezing current.

When Sasuke emerges from the water, gasping and shivering and panting, Naruto and all of his clones are doubled over, shaking with laughter. A familiar pressure builds behind Sasuke's eyes as he slicks his hair back slowly, dramatically, his Rinnegan and Sharingan glowing.

"You're so fucking dead, idiot--"

"Juugo?"

Sasuke blinks a couple times, roused from his daydream by a tiny

hand poking him in the chest. He looks down.

"You're awake," he says, smiling a little as he brushes some of Naruto's hair off the boy's forehead. He sets Naruto down on the ground, holding out a hand, and Naruto takes it without hesitation.

"Where are we?" Naruto asks, looking around with eyes as wide and round as the moon, and Sasuke feels a warm glow of affection intensify in his chest until he can barely keep it in.

"West of Konoha," he says, offering the simplest explanation. It's obvious that the boy has never left the confines of the village before; he's taking it all in with sincere excitement, with awestruck wonder. Sasuke feels it too, the soaring, tingling feeling lifting his heart and tugging at the corners of his lips--he's on the run with *Naruto* again.

Just like old times.

The wind rushes through sun-bleached, dried green leaves, rattling and rustling through the foliage as they walk into the treeline. The sound of wind blowing over unending fields of grass is replaced by the chittering of squirrels and the splashing babble of water.

They reach the creek, standing side-by-side at its very edge. Sasuke leans down, running his fingers through the water and heating the entire stream with a small trickle of chakra so it wouldn't be too cold for Naruto to bathe in.

"What are we going to do now?" Naruto says, watching leaves caught in the water of the brook as they swirl and move downstream. Sasuke thinks about that for a moment, letting his gaze roam over little Naruto, over the trees that cast dappled shadows over them, up at the azure dome of the sky.

It's Naruto's eyes that finally do him in; wide and innocent, twin blue flames bursting with boundless sincerity. They ensnare Sasuke better than any genjutsu ever could, paralyzing him, making his heart race as he thinks how close Naruto came to being hurt.

Sasuke swallows the spike of rage, tugging his hand free of Naruto's and letting his blunt fingernails dig into the flesh of his palm. He's *seething*, grinding his teeth and clenching his jaw, because how *dare* anyone hurt Naruto?

And then his breath catches in his throat, and his hands start shaking, because someone *did* hurt Naruto. Kaguya had--she'd impaled Naruto,

gutted him and left him to die in the frigid tundra, and Sasuke hadn't--

He hadn't--

He hadn't been strong enough to save him.

Sasuke's heart is in freefall, plummeting from the highest heights of the heavens, spinning around wildly, and he's not sure which way is up anymore. All he can feel is the *panic*, the fear of losing *this* again. A choked gasp, stricken and soft, slips past his lips as he sways--

"Juugo?"

A voice breaks through the haze of hurt, and a tiny hand tugs insistently at his sleeve. The world had been swimming out of focus, flickering with dark spots, but now all Sasuke sees are animated blue eyes and golden hair, and all he hears is Naruto's voice.

"Juugo? Are you okay?"

Is Sasuke okay? Has he *ever* been okay? Has there ever been a time when the layers of pain peeled back and let happiness glimmer through?

And he realizes that yes--there have been times where he's been okay. More than okay, because the years spent with Naruto on the run, wandering the empty world and saving whoever they found, waging a war on the fly--those are the memories Sasuke cherishes more than anything else.

Looking down at a six-year-old Naruto, Sasuke's reminded again that he hasn't *really* lost that. It's still here, right in front of him. It's a second chance staring him right in the face.

"I'm fine," he says, his breathing evening out as he takes Naruto's hand. He reaches up with his other hand, fingers brushing over the dried tear tracks traversing Naruto's cheeks. Sasuke lets his Sharingan activate for a split-second, searing the sight into his memory. He wants to *remember* this.

When the going gets tough, when the ghosts that populate Sasuke's past threaten to drag him down and leave him sobbing in the dirt, when the weight of the world gets too heavy for his shoulders, he's going to remember Naruto's tear-stained face.

This is what he's fighting for.

A world in which the only marks on this sweet, innocent face will come from laugh lines and old age; a world in which little children can grow up never knowing the burden of war or grief--

A world in which Naruto will never cry, ever again.

“The damage to the Merchant Quarter was confined to a corridor along the eastern border, where we recovered Team Ro. Hospital staff report that they, like the other ANBU teams that were incapacitated, are stable, but...”

The jonin’s monotone manner of speaking is nearly enough to lull Jiraiya to sleep, and he hides a yawn behind a hand. Fugaku, sitting next to him in one of the strategy room’s austere wooden chairs, shoots him a disapproving glare.

The two of them are peppered with small cuts and ugly, dull purple bruises, *charming* mementos from Juugo’s escape. Falling stone and debris had pummeled every inch of Jiraiya’s body, and even sitting down, his limbs and torso throb in unison.

He *really* wishes he were in bed.

But this is a crisis, the likes of which haven’t been seen since the nine-tails’ rampage through Konoha six years ago, so Jiraiya and Fugaku and a half-dozen other high ranking officials are crowded into one of the stuffy strategy rooms hidden in the depths of Hokage Tower. He can see the worried lines carved into the faces of everyone in the room, most prominently on the Third Hokage’s weathered face.

“Then, from what Team Tera was able to observe, the unknown assailant engaged Orochimaru in combat,” the jonin says, still reading off the scroll in his hands. Jiraiya raises an eyebrow.

“Stop for a moment,” Fugaku says, frowning. “Was Orochimaru’s target the boy? Is that confirmed?”

“The vessel was the most probable target,” the jonin replies. “There are no other strategic targets within a half-mile radius of where you intercepted him.”

“His name is Naruto,” Jiraiya interjects mildly. Fugaku presses his fingers against the lacquered wood of the table in front of him, then continues.

“Danzo’s killer and Orochimaru fought each other. Why would they do that if they were both there for the boy?” Fugaku asks, looking over at Jiraiya.

“They weren’t working together,” Jiraiya realizes, sitting up in his chair and nearly knocking a scroll off the table as he gestures. “This--we’ve been looking at this the wrong way. They weren’t working together to infiltrate the village, they were working *against* each other--”

“And when their paths crossed, they each tried to stop the other,” Fugaku finishes, brow still furrowed. “Judging by the fact that it was Danzo’s killer who fought against Jiraiya and I, Orochimaru lost that fight.”

“How did a single man manage to overpower multiple ANBU teams, police officers, and *both* of you?” Shikaku Nara mutters, shaking his head in disbelief. “None of the forces we dispatched even *slowed* him down.”

The line of Fugaku’s jaw hardens, and he glances quickly at Jiraiya. There’s hesitation in his expression as he opens his mouth, as if to say something, before quickly closing it. The Third Hokage clears his throat, looking between Jiraiya and Fugaku.

“Did the two of you notice anything about the assassin?” he asks. Jiraiya suppresses a sigh--he knows why Fugaku doesn’t want to bring *this* up, but there’s no real way to keep it quiet.

“The assassin--Juugo--possessed both the Sharingan, and the Rinnegan,” he says, and a wave of startled expressions flicker around the table. “He was proficient in their use--”

“A Sharingan-user absconding with the nine-tails’ vessel?” Hiashi Hyuga interrupts. “A fact that seems conveniently left out from your earlier report, Fugaku.”

“The Uchiha clan was not responsible for this attack,” Fugaku snaps back.

“The *Rinnegan*?” Shikaku asks, looking utterly bewildered. “It’s *real*?”

A cacophony of voices break out in sudden conversation, everyone speaking at once, asking questions and demanding answers. Fugaku sits in sullen silence, glaring at Hiashi, who stares back icily with his cold, pale eyes. Shikaku and a brown-haired man Jiraiya doesn’t

recognize lean close to each other, gesturing anxiously as they talk quickly. The ANBU commander takes out a small knife and starts picking at the edge of the table.

When the chaos shows no sign of dissipating, the Third Hokage stands at the head of the table, and raises his voice over the din.

“Please, restrain yourselves,” he says sharply. “We don’t have time for this. Jiraiya, can you please elaborate?”

“Yes,” Jiraiya says, shifting in his chair and wincing as the giant bruise on his ass aches in response. “I, uh, was able to get quite close to Juugo. His left eye had--well, it was a Rinnegan. I’ve seen it before, and I don’t think I’m mistaken.”

Fugaku lets out a resigned sigh, rubbing his forehead.

“The assassin was able to summon a partial Susanoo,” he says. “It’s a technique that requires the user to have awakened the Mangekyou Sharingan in both eyes.”

“A technique known exclusively to the Uchiha clan?” Hiashi asks, and Fugaku scowls.

“Besides myself, there’s only one other person with the Mangekyou Sharingan. And neither of us possess a *Rinnegan*, something you should clearly be able to see with those damn eyes of yours--”

“Thank you, Fugaku,” the Hokage says, cutting the two of them off before they resume their bickering. “No one here thinks that you or your clan is responsible for this attack.”

“Do we have any leads on the assassin’s whereabouts?” Shikaku asks the jonin, who shuffles through the papers in front of him before picking out a scroll emblazoned with the red border of an “urgent” message.

“We know that he headed west,” he says, holding out the scroll. “He was--he was *airborne*, but our scouts were able to visually track him before they lost sight of him around twenty miles out from the outer gates.”

“That’s not very specific,” Shikaku says, letting out a breath as he unfurls the scroll and skims its contents. “He could be anywhere between here and the Land of Hot Springs by now.”

“Then we should start searching *now*,” Jiraiya says, a firm edge to his voice. “We’re bringing Naruto home.”

“And we will,” the Hokage says, taking a long puff from his pipe. “Shikaku, get me a roster of available tracker teams by the end of the hour. Once we have actionable intelligence we can dispatch a recovery team.”

“How can we be sure that we’ll be able to capture him this time?” Shikaku says. Fugaku crosses his arms, looking like a particularly disgruntled cat.

“We’ll be ready for him this time,” Fugaku says shortly. A grim smile catches on the very edges of Jiraiya’s mouth, and he nods with determination.

“We’ll bring Naruto back.”

The metal floor warps and splits, a shadow seamlessly splitting from the steel and flowing upwards. It resolves into the shape of a twisted, deformed creature, barely visible in the dim light.

A woman steps out from the corner, amber eyes glowing in the dark as she draws near.

“You’re late,” she says, not a single emotion present in her flat voice. “He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

The door behind her is heavy, forged from black cast iron, but she pushes it open easily. A groaning, metallic creak echoes down the hallway, and watery light-gray light pours through the open doorway. The creature scuttles forward, footsteps scuffling over the floor.

This room stands at the very apex of one of the massive towers that dot Amegakure, its far wall open to the elements. Through it, the creature can see the entire skyline spread out against the backdrop of the setting sun. Amegakure glitters with multicolored lights, rain-slicked brilliance and the vibrance of thousands of lives, a stark contrast to the dead chill of the metal room. The amber-eyed woman lets the door close behind her with a deafening, reverberating clang that makes the floor tremble, and the creature shivers as it looks forward.

There is a man standing at the ledge, facing out over the city. In the

dying rays of the sunset, red-gold and magenta, the creature can see dull orange hair and black robes emblazoned with iridescent red clouds.

“The snake failed,” the man says. His voice is deep, rich, a velvet rumble that makes the air crackle with static discharge and unadulterated *power*. The creature falls to its knees, forehead pressed against the cool, smooth steel of the floor.

“He fled the battlefield, and I was unable to locate him,” it mumbles, its voice quavering as it steals a worried glance upwards. The man in the robes doesn’t bother turning around, resuming his vigil over the skyline.

“I expected him to slither away rather than return here. It is in his nature,” he says softly. “But I did not expect him to fail. Zetsu, do tell; how did the Leaf Village drive him back?”

Zetsu lowers its head in another long prostration, fingers trembling with dread. After a moment, it rises to its knees, head bowed, and continues speaking.

“T-there was a man who stopped him,” Zetsu stammers out. “He-he bore the eye of Divinity, just as you do--”

“What did you say?” the amber-eyed woman says sharply, striding further into the room until she towers over Zetsu’s wretched form. “Speak clearly!”

“Peace, Konan,” the man says, holding up his hand. “Zetsu, repeat yourself.”

A series of sudden, jerky twitches pass through Zetsu’s body, starting from his legs and climbing upwards, building in intensity until it convulses and gasps, abyssal black flowing over pale white skin until the entire creature is shrouded in night. Zetsu’s simpering fear is replaced by wicked self-assurance and sinister intent as two eyes, burning an evil shade of sulfurous yellow, open slowly.

“The Rinnegan, master,” Black Zetsu rasps, its voice harsh and discordant and grating. It coughs violently, some foul fluid dripping from its sable lips, before continuing. “A man with a single Rinnegan stood against the Snake Sage and cast him out.”

“That’s not possible,” Konan says, stricken, staring at the man in the robes with a look of utter shock on her face. “The eyes of Divinity are

bestowed upon one, and only one--”

“Peace, Konan,” the man repeats, a firm edge creeping into his voice. Konan falls silent at once, returning to the shadows lining the back of the room.

“The world is not as it should be,” the man murmurs, still facing the great gap in the wall before him. “Danzo of the Leaf’s sudden demise, and then this *charlatan*, wielding a power reserved for only the gods...”

Black Zetsu stands slowly, warily, its gaze still fixed on the man in the robes. It tilts its head and scents the air, then cautiously takes a couple more steps further into the room.

“It blasphemes me,” the man says, thoughtfully, as if discussing the weather.

“What shall I tell the others?” Black Zetsu asks. The man shifts slightly, stretching his arms out as if he wishes to grasp the whole world.

“The world is changing,” he says. “We must change with it. Tell the others to prepare themselves. Our plans are being... *accelerated*.”

“Will we move against the jinchuuriki, master? Is it not too *soon*?” Black Zetsu dares to ask.

“Orochimaru’s failure has revealed our intentions. It is time for the Akatsuki to take action,” the man replies. A shiver runs down the length of Black Zetsu’s body, a sickening ripple that brings to mind all things unnatural.

“They will tell tales of your boldness in ages to come,” it says, bowing deeply from the waist.

“The era of decay and death must draw to a close. The old must draw to an end, so that life may yet evolve and flourish,” the man says, ignoring the creature entirely. “It is time for the new war, the *last* war. The war that will save us all.”

“And deliver us unto the unending dream,” Black Zetsu agrees, a twisted and crooked smile parting its face to reveal jagged, uneven teeth. “I will inform the others of your will, master.”

“There is a saying in Lightning Country,” the man says slowly. “They

say ‘the greater the loss of life, the greater the peace that follows’. Is that not poetic, Zetsu?”

“True *wisdom*, master.”

And then the man finally turns to face Black Zetsu, a black silhouette standing before the most glorious, fiery sunset that Amegakure has seen in years. Ropes of gold, red, and orange-glazed clouds curl through the skies, and exalted eyes glow a blinding shade of purple. The man smiles humorlessly, gesturing over his shoulder at the expanse of the city below.

“We have much blood to spill.”

Chapter End Notes

no beta for this chapter, so excuse any messy bits!

I went back and read the first couple of author's notes for this fic (which was very embarrassing and mortifying, because I am an idiot most of the time and these notes exist to document that), and I realized that I had intended this fic to be, and I quote, "heartwarmingly fluffy" when I started it back in July.

I--

Yeah, I don't know what happened either >.>

Oh also, happy holidays to everyone!!

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Kakashi's Worst Idea Ever

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Kakashi clips the windowsill with his elbow as he's climbing through, letting out a string of colorful curses as he drops into Tenzo's kitchen and slams the window shut behind him with unnecessary force. It's just another thing that's gone wrong in what's shaping up to be an absolutely *miserable* day. He stands in the middle of Tenzo's apartment, swaying in the dark, and lets out a weary breath.

Maybe some tea will help.

Ten minutes later, as Kakashi is noisily bustling around in the kitchen, making himself some tea and cleaning the dishes while he's at it, the door to Tenzo's bedroom creaks open and the lights turn on.

"You know, you could have used the front door," Tenzo says, blinking away the sleepiness in his eyes. He stretches lazily and yawns, only wearing a thin pair of cotton sleep pants. Kakashi just grunts in reply and grabs a second mug from the cupboard.

"Not that I don't love seeing you, but it's midnight," Tenzo says, hopping atop a kitchen stool and letting his legs dangle as he watches Kakashi with a concerned expression. "What's wrong?"

Kakashi tugs the folded mission request form out from his pocket and tosses it at the other man without a word. Tenzo grabs it out of midair, smoothing out the creases and holding it up to the warm, yellow light. Kakashi sets the steaming mug in front of him as he's reading, studiously staring at the ceiling so he doesn't have to make eye contact.

"Kakashi..." Tenzo says, setting down the form and looking at him. His voice is warm with concern and affection and *pity*, and Kakashi can't bring himself to look up and see Tenzo's expression.

"They rejected my request to be placed on one of the tracker teams assigned to retrieve Naruto," he says hoarsely, gripping his own mug between his hands. From the corner of his eye, he sees Tenzo nodding slowly.

"Well, you need some time to recuperate," Tenzo says carefully. "I'm

sorry that they declined your request, but you've been in and out of the hospital--"

"What, you agree with them?" Kakashi snaps, and Tenzo's eyes grow wide.

"Kakashi, there are plenty of talented trackers on these teams, even if they're not letting--"

"They're not *me*! I'm the best tracker ANBU has had in *years*, and you know it!"

"Kakashi--"

"*It's my fucking fault!*" Kakashi yells, and the mug caught between his fingers explodes into tiny shards, splattering steaming-hot tea all over the counter and over his hands. His fingers tremble slightly as the searing-hot pain of liquid scorching his flesh zings through his hands, but Kakashi stands perfectly still, looking down, shoulders heaving.

"It's *my* fault," he repeats quietly, closing his eyes. "I was--he was with me, and I couldn't *protect* him, Tenzo. Fuck, I--"

It feels like the room's spinning, and Kakashi loses track of time for a long moment, and when he opens his eyes again, he's slumped on Tenzo's couch. Tenzo cradles Kakashi's angry red fingers, glowing green chakra illuminating his focused expression as he carefully heals them.

"He's gone because of me, Tenzo," he says, and Tenzo shakes his head.

"We were *all* there, Kakashi. None of us could stop that guy," he says. The green light fades away, and Kakashi looks down at the smooth, unblemished skin on his hands.

"What if they can't bring him back?" Kakashi asks quietly, jaw clenched, slumping back. Tenzo sighs.

"You can't think like that. C'mon. We'll get him back," he says after a moment. Kakashi buries his face in his hands, pressing his fingers into his face until it *hurts*.

"I never told him--I *always* followed orders, Tenzo. Naruto didn't even know who I was," he whispers, almost inaudibly. "He grew up not knowing there's people who love him. *I* love him."

“Kakashi...” Tenzo says, his voice cracking and completely *wrecked*.
“I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah,” Kakashi replies mechanically, letting his hands fall to his sides.

“Just--fuck it, come here,” Tenzo grunts, leaning over, and Kakashi tenses as the other man’s arms encircle him and fold him into a tight hug. It’s awkward, it’s warm, but it’s also fucking *comforting*, having something this strong and steadfast to hold him steady when it seems like the world’s about to tip over. It takes him a couple seconds, because he’s just not *used* to being touched outside of hand-to-hand combat, but Kakashi’s shoulders droop and he relaxes. He even reaches up half-heartedly and hugs Tenzo back.

“Do--do you, uh, do this often?” Kakashi mumbles into Tenzo’s shoulder.

“Once before,” Tenzo replies. Kakashi mulls that over for a moment.

“It’s not bad?” he offers after a couple of seconds. “Thank you.”

“I thought you were gonna stab me when I touched you,” Tenzo says in a conversational tone after they break apart, and Kakashi can’t help but snort in amusement, the empty feeling inside him receding just a bit.

“You went in for a hug thinking you would get stabbed? Pretty shitty instincts for an ANBU,” Kakashi says. Tenzo chuckles.

“You looked like you needed it, so I risked it,” he says. “Listen. We’ll go down to ANBU headquarters and try to get you assigned to a tracker team tomorrow, okay?”

“They’re not going to change their minds,” Kakashi says, the faint smile slipping right off his face.

“There’s no harm in us trying, is there?” Tenzo says.

“I guess.”

“Alright, it’s settled then,” Tenzo says, smiling gently as he stands up. “You’re staying here tonight, on the couch. Let me clean up this mug and I’ll get you a pillow and some blankets.”

Kakashi watches from the couch as Tenzo steps into the tiny kitchen,

grabbing a broom from behind something and sweeping ceramic shards that tinkle gently against the tile floors.

“Just promise me you won’t do anything stupid,” Tenzo calls, his voice muffled slightly as he crouches and checks the floor for any sharp pieces. “Can you do that?”

“Okay. I won’t do anything stupid,” Kakashi says reluctantly. He pauses for a moment, then adds, “I’m sorry about your mug.”

“It’s fine,” Tenzo says with a lopsided grin. “Shisui made it for me, and I’ve been looking for a way to get rid of that eyesore for a while.”

Stars fall from the great blue sky, pinpoints of white-hot brilliance descending from the heavens, and the earth around Kakashi explodes. Clouds of blinding, choking dust blossom and swirl, and Kakashi falls to his knees, coughing violently and skinning his knees on the rough stone underfoot.

When he catches his breath and looks up, pushing sweaty hair out of his eyes, he sees piles of sickly-yellow sedimentary rock, and he knows exactly where he is. It doesn’t matter how many times he sees this, how many times he replays this scene over and over again—it’s never going to get easier.

Because Obito’s body peeks out from under the slab of rock, his blood festooning the ground with nauseating crimson streamers. Because Kakashi can see the glazed-over look in his friend’s eye and hear the rattle of his dying breaths. Because Kakashi has seen this all before.

Obito’s the one crushed under a mass of unyielding stone, but it’s Kakashi who feels like his insides are being torn apart. He scrambles forward on all fours, blood dripping from the raw skin on his hands and knees.

“Obito!” he cries out, pressing his hands against the rock and shoving hard, leaving smears of his blood all over it. “Obito! Hold on!”

His hand slips and his grip loosens, and he nearly falls flat on his face, his forehead smacking against rough stone. He blinks a couple times, black spots flickering in front of his face, trying to figure out what to fucking do. And--and all Kakashi can think is that--

There won’t be any more warm nights spent brawling on the training field, sweat dripping into their eyes as they charge each other. There won’t be any more team lunches where Obito grabs Kakashi by the collar with both

hands and cusses him out for being a jerk. There won't be any more early morning runs where Obito takes off his sweaty shirt and chucks it at Kakashi's head with a smarmy grin on his bright face.

He's never going to watch Obito get older, or endure the other boy's competitive glares under the heat of the summer sun. He's never going to take him to that spot on Hokage Mountain that looks over the whole village, or know what it's like to wake up next to him in the morning. He's never going to tell Obito how he feels, how he's felt for a very long time, but he was too scared to say it out loud--

He's never going to do any of these things, because this is where their story ends.

And when they reach the last page, when the chapter's over, when the book closes and it all fades to black--when the last breath finally breaks free from the rapidly-cooling prison of Obito's lips and climbs skyward, when the boy Kakashi loves dies right in front of him--

When it's all over, Kakashi gently sets Obito's hand on the ground and lets him go.

There's a flicker of movement to his left, and he watches with wide, teary eyes as a yellow-haired boy pushes past him to grab Obito's limp hand. The boy looks up at Kakashi, blue eyes empty and vacant.

"We're both going to die," Naruto tells him, glancing down at Obito. Kakashi's hands won't stop trembling as he falls flat on his ass, the breath leaving his body in a long hiss.

"Why didn't you save us?" the boys ask, their voices a monotone, emotional chorus that makes his skin crawl. Kakashi scoots backwards, sharp points of rock digging into the flesh of his palms as he panics. "Why didn't you save us? Why didn't you save us save us save us save us save us--"

*And he wakes up with a jolt, nearly falling off the couch, his bare chest drenched in cold sweat. Kakashi's heart is racing, and his chest is so tight that he's having trouble breathing, as if he just ran thirty miles without a single sip of water. He sits up, leaning against the couch's armrest, glancing around the darkened room. *This is Tenzo's apartment*, he reminds himself. *This is safe.**

"Fuck," Kakashi gasps, running a hand over his face. "Fuck."

Another bout of banging rings through the apartment as someone pounds mercilessly on the front door. Kakashi opens his eyes blearily, then groans and covers his eyes against the watery rays of early-morning sunlight shimmering through the window. There's a clatter from the bedroom as Tenzo stumbles out, also looking like he'd just woken up. The brown-haired man heads to the door and whips it open with a frown.

"Tenzo!" Shisui says, grinning and waving energetically. Tenzo slams the door shut in his face.

"Was that necessary?" Kakashi asks, a little surprised with the vehemence of Tenzo's reaction. Tenzo glares at him.

"Did you tell him where my new apartment was?" he demands, and Kakashi shakes his head as he gets up from the couch. Tenzo scowls even harder.

"It must have been Itachi, then. Fucking snitch," Tenzo grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest. Kakashi rolls his eyes.

"Quit being a dick," he admonishes, pushing past Tenzo and opening the door. Shisui looks up, his face lighting up, and then he freezes, looking between Tenzo and Kakashi.

"Uh, hey Cap," he says, turning bright red and taking a step back. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you two were--uh, like, um, I don't want to interrupt..."

That's when Kakashi realizes that he's half-naked, and Tenzo is *too*, and they both look like they just woke up, which they just *had*, and Shisui almost *certainly* thought that they had--

"It's not--no, *shut up*, stop it," he sputters, lunging forward and grabbing Shisui by the collar. "It's not like that. You're not interrupting anything. Come in *right now*."

Shisui yelps as Kakashi drags him over the threshold, his hands scrabbling uselessly against Kakashi's ironclad grip on his shirt collar.

"Please don't kill me, I swear I won't tell anyone," Shisui babbles, and Tenzo shoots Kakashi an exasperated look that says *you should have left the damn door closed*. Kakashi ignores him, letting go of Shisui's shirt as they reach the living room.

"I slept here," he says, pointing at the wadded up blankets and

rumpled pillow. Shisui nods quickly, eyes wide, hands held up in a placating gesture.

“I believe you! I promise!” he says, and Kakashi’s eye twitches involuntarily, because he has to *make sure*--

“Tenzo slept in his room, and I slept here,” he repeats, and Shisui nods wordlessly, still bright red. Tenzo clears his throat, still by the front door, leaning against the wall.

“Why are you here, Shisui?” he asks, glowering like a bad-tempered streetcat. Shisui perks up once again, pulling a small, brown paper packet out from his pants pockets.

“I heard you moved into your new place, and Itachi told me where it was, and I wanted to bring you a housewarming gift!” he says, holding up the square of brown paper.

“What the fuck is that?” Tenzo says, squinting.

“It’s one of those, uh, gardening seed mixes? It has like, a dozen different kinds of wildflower seeds and you can just plant them,” Shisui says, glancing down at the label on the packet. “This has a bunch of species from Lightning Country that you can’t find around Konoha, so I thought you’d like it.”

Tenzo purses his lips, still scowling at Shisui, as he walks over slowly and takes the gift. He looks it over for a moment, then glances up at Shisui again.

“I’m making you some tea. Go sit on the couch,” he says, and Shisui grins.

“Do you like it?”

“...Thank you,” Tenzo says, and then he turns around and marches into the kitchen.

“Hey, do you think you could put it in that mug I made you?” Shisui asks hopefully, sitting next to Kakashi on the couch and propping one foot up on the coffee table. Tenzo smiles sweetly, his eyes terrifyingly blank.

“I’m so sorry,” he says, without a single note of contrition in his voice. “Kakashi broke it by accident!”

“Aw, Cap,” Shisui whines, slumping back against the couch cushions. “Why’d you have to go and do that? Now I’m gonna have to give Tenzo the one I made for you.”

“I’ll do my best to cope with the loss,” Kakashi says dryly. “Are you okay? You were limping a little.”

“Ah, my leg’s a little sore,” Shisui says, rubbing his knee absentmindedly. “Say, Cap, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“You have a question?” Kakashi asks, feigning surprise. “I’m shocked.”

“Yeah, well,” Shisui chuckles, scratching the back of his neck. His smile fades a little, and a serious look flashes over his face as he sends Kakashi a sideways glance. “If I wanted to leave ANBU and transfer to a different posting, would you--uh, would you write a recommendation for me?”

“A recommendation?” Kakashi repeats, tilting his head a little. “You don’t want to be in ANBU anymore?”

“Don’t get me wrong, Cap, you two are great,” Shisui says, giving him a warm smile and looking fondly over at where Tenzo is fiddling with the kettle. “It’s just that, um, Itachi’s leaving, and I... I was kinda hoping that if you put a good word in, they’ll let me transfer to train with the Hokage Guard Platoon.”

“You want *my* recommendation?” Kakashi asks, still a little confused. “You don’t need my permission to put in a transfer request.”

“Well, yeah, but you’re my captain and you’re kind of a badass,” Shisui explains. He gestures broadly at Kakashi, and Kakashi can see the little sparkle of admiration in his dark eyes. “You’re like, famous.”

“Oh,” Kakashi says. He nods slowly. “Okay, I guess I can do that for you.”

Tenzo sets a mug down on the coffee table and sits down on the couch, right next to Shisui. There’s a weird look on his face as he stares off into the distance for a second, then looks at Shisui.

“You want to leave ANBU?” he asks.

“I learned a lot from watching you two,” Shisui says, frowning slightly as he moves over to give Tenzo more room to sit. “But it feels like it’s time for me to move on.”

“You’re just following Itachi like a lost puppy,” Tenzo says quietly, his lips twitching with an involuntary smirk, and Shisui throws his head back and lets out a laugh.

“My mom said that too,” he says, blushing a little from embarrassment. “But there’s nothing wrong with chasing after the people who you l--who are important to you.”

Tenzo makes a gagging sound, and Shisui whacks him in the arm, and then they’re back to bickering as usual. But Kakashi doesn’t pay attention, because he’s staring at the steam curling above the mug of now-forgotten tea on the coffee table in front of him.

There’s nothing wrong with chasing after the people who are important to you.

Naruto’s apartment building and the entire neighborhood around it had been cordoned off, patrolled by ANBU squads and crawling with trackers trying to pick out any leads they could from the wreckage. Kakashi had tried to slip past the cordon and look for clues himself, but an ANBU in a lizard mask had turned him away.

Now, twenty minutes later, Kakashi opens the door to his place and stands in the doorway.

He’s a little sweaty from running from one end of Konoha to the other, and the flow of cooled air emanating from his austere, empty apartment is a welcome relief as it blows over tacky, sweat-slicked skin.

Kakashi closes the door behind him, taking off his sandals. The jacket he’s wearing lands in a pile on the ground, and he chucks his keys across the room. They jangle as they bounce off the wall and land somewhere on the floor.

His hand slides along the wall to his right until he feels the knob of the light switch and turns it on, and the apartment is flooded with sudden illumination. It’s empty, spartan, almost *unfurnished*. Bare.

Just like Kakashi himself, really.

Maybe it’s for the best that Shisui wants to leave ANBU. Shisui still has that spark, still has that boundless optimism and easy smile, still laughs and loves without reservation. Maybe it’s for the best that

Shisui leaves before ANBU rips that right out of him.

Because ANBU wasn't made for good men and women, and Shisui is still a good man. Kakashi almost envies that about him; somewhere along the way, in between watching the people he loved die and being sent to fight a war as a child, Kakashi had lost that.

That's how he ended up here, standing alone in an empty apartment. Because except for maybe Tenzo, there's no one who would care one way or the other if Kakashi came back from a mission safely, or in a body bag.

He decides he needs a distraction, so he pulls out an old pen and rips out a page from one of his reconnaissance journals, and starts writing the recommendation for Shisui. It's awkward. If Kakashi had it his way, he'd just write "*transfer him wherever he wants, he's a good guy*". But that's probably not going to cut it, so instead he starts writing about Shisui's virtues. Well, the marketable ones.

It takes him a half hour to write, perched atop a rickety chair and hunched over a shitty desk that Tenzo had insisted on buying him when he'd seen that Kakashi's furniture consisted wholly of a set of drawers and a mattress laid out on the floor. His hand's cramping by the end of it, because he's used to taking lives with these fingers, not writing.

And when it's finished, when there's a dozen lines of messy, scrawly handwriting stretching over the white paper, he sets the pen down and looks over what he wrote. It's fine. It's passable.

But now Kakashi doesn't have anything to do besides sit at his desk and brood.

There's nothing wrong with chasing after the people who are important to you. That's what Shisui had said in Tenzo's apartment. Kakashi mulls that over in his head as he leans back in the chair.

He's spent many nights doing just that before. Watching Naruto scamper around town from the rooftops, looking into the boy's apartment from the building across the street, leaving groceries in the kitchen table as often as he can--Kakashi has done all these things for fucking *years*.

But now there's nothing to fill his empty hours, nothing *left* to guard and protect. Because when it had really come down to it, when it had *mattered*, Kakashi hadn't been able to do *shit*.

And *fuck*, that's the part that really hurts.

He doesn't know if Naruto's okay, or if he's ever going to see that adorable little face ever again. He doesn't know if he's ever going to watch the boy prank another storekeeper, or if he'll ever be able to leave takeout from Ichiraku on the boy's kitchen table. He doesn't know if he'll ever be able to tell Naruto that he loves him.

There's nothing wrong with chasing after the people who are important to you.

Kakashi remembers being handed back his mission request form, staring numbly at the red ink of the rejection stamp stretching across the top. He remembers going to headquarters earlier today with Tenzo, trying to appeal that decision, and being turned away harshly. He remembers ramming his fist into a stone wall in frustration, leaving a jagged crater behind, avoiding the look of pity lurking in Tenzo's eyes.

He's spent fucking *years* watching Naruto. He can pick out the boy's scent from *miles* away, so why won't they let him *fucking* help? Kakashi knows he's too close to the mission, that he cares too much about the boy to be objective, but--

But he could find Naruto, if they let him. He *knows* he could do it. Instead he's stuck here, staring at a fucking wall, unable to lift a single finger to help.

Fuck *that* shit.

And so Kakashi tears out another page, and starts writing a new note. This one is meant for Tenzo. This one is an apology.

Because Kakashi had promised to not do anything stupid, and he's about to break that promise. Because Tenzo's going to fucking *kill* him when he finds out what Kakashi is about to do.

It's not as long as Shisui's recommendation, not much beyond two short sentences telling Tenzo what he's doing, and then saying sorry for being an idiot. Kakashi doesn't really know what to say beyond that, so it'll have to be enough.

Kakashi leaves both notes on his bare mattress, knowing that when Tenzo isn't able to find him, he'll break into Kakashi's place and find them. Every ninja in ANBU is in the habit of keeping a ready bag in case of emergency missions; it takes Kakashi less than two minutes to

grab his bag and pack it with some extra rations.

He dresses in black, head-to-toe, as he watches the sunset through his window, making sure to take off his forehead protector and covering any exposed metal that might gleam in the moonlight.

It'll be easy enough to slip past the guards patrolling the perimeter of the village like this; they're concerned with keeping threats out, not keeping people in, and Kakashi's an expert infiltrator.

He pauses for a second after he opens the window and shoulders his pack, glancing back at the two notes sitting on his mattress. The gravity of the situation sinks in, just as the final rays of sunlight fade out. Kakashi's about to violate his orders. He's about to desert. He's about to become a missing-nin, a criminal. But then he hears Shisui's voice in his head--

There's nothing wrong with chasing after the people who are important to you.

Fuck it all. He's going to bring Naruto home *himself*.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know about you, but I'm feeling 2022!!

Happy New Years' Day everyone!! Hopefully 2022 will be a much better year than the shitfest we're leaving behind. I hope you all enjoy good health and good times, and here's a new chapter as a bit of a holiday gift.

This chapter was fun to write! I think y'all can kinda see why this arc is my favorite one so far, all the pieces are coming together :P

twitter: [@baja_heaux](#)

Third Time's the Charm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The pungent smell of some roasted spice burns Kakashi's nose, and he coughs a couple times as he pushes through the crowded square, trying to put some space between himself and the spice vendor's stall. The burbling chatter of hundreds of civilians fills the air, accompanied by dozens of unfamiliar and strange smells. It's almost impossible to pick up the faint, smoky scent that he's been tracking for the past week.

Almost impossible.

Any other tracker would have lost the trail *days* ago, getting lost in young forests of birch trees spilling over the rolling hillsides. But Kakashi's been watching Naruto since the boy was a newborn; distance and terrain are nothing but temporary inconveniences for him.

So here he is now, in some nameless trading town, fighting his way through a teeming marketplace, trying his best to blend into the masses of civilians, his distinctive silver hair dyed matte black. His limbs throb with a deep-seated ache, a weariness borne from his brutal pace across the length of Fire Country, and his fingers shake a little from anticipation.

Naruto's *here*.

He ducks into an alley, past a vendor peddling an assortment of jangling windchimes, and wraps his cloak firmly around himself as he hurries over the roughshod cobblestones underfoot. His destination looms over the end of the street; a three-floor inn rising from the ranks of colorful awnings and busy storefronts.

Attempting an infiltration in broad daylight isn't Kakashi's preferred approach to this situation, but leaving Naruto in the stranger's clutches for a *moment* longer than necessary is out of the question. At least his quarry won't expect an attack in the middle of the day; the stranger is more likely to be wary at nighttime.

Kakashi flattens himself against the rough brick wall to his left, drawing on a trickle of chakra to blur the rays of light hitting his body

so his form becomes obfuscated and difficult to see. Then, channeling chakra into his fingertips until they glow with faint blue light and pressing them to the bricks, he scampers up the alley wall.

Crouching behind a boxy chimney, he studies the inn. There's a street between him and the second-floor buildings, a canyon filled with a couple awnings and lazy streams of people milling about. He can feel Naruto's presence over by the eastern face, on the same level as him. The boy's chakra signature is dimmed, as if he's asleep, and there's no one else in the room with him as far as Kakashi can tell.

He relaxes his grip on the stone ledge in front of him, expanding his awareness. All he can sense are the presences of hundreds of civilians; the closest ninja seems to be more than a thousand feet to the south. He looks back towards the inn, figuring distances in his head.

Still slightly wary of a possible trap, Kakashi ties a length of ninja wire to a kunai and flicks it across the street. It sinks into the stucco, just next to the window closest to Naruto's slumbering chakra signature. With a flicker of motion and a lunge forward, Kakashi soars over the street and plasters himself against the wall, adhering himself to the facade. Then, taking a quick breath, Kakashi swings over and prepares to *smash* through the window--

Only to let out a startled gasp as the windowpane slides up, and a gloved hand grabs him by the collar and drags him inside.

Kakashi throws a punch reflectively, only to catch sight of a swirling red-and-black eye. In the span of a heartbeat, his limbs go numb and he goes limp, held upright only by the stranger's ironclad grip on his shirt.

And then Kakashi's staring into the face of the stranger who had assassinated Danzo, destroyed a sizable chunk of Konoha, and abducted Naruto.

He's so *young*, up close. He can't be any older than Kakashi is, but he holds himself like a world-weary veteran. The man's mismatched eyes flick up, and he frowns slightly.

"You dyed your hair?" he asks. His voice is deep and surprisingly soft, but Kakashi blinks incredulously at the unexpected question. The man seems to realize that Kakashi isn't able to speak, and he mutters an apology as his Sharingan glows briefly.

Kakashi can feel his mouth and jaw now, and he's about to breathe a

jet of fire directly into the man's face when a painful jolt of electricity flickers through his body, disrupting his attack. The man's frown deepens.

"Stop it. You're gonna wake the kid," he says softly, tilting his head towards the sole bed in the room. Naruto's downy golden hair is barely visible amidst the massive comforter and pillows piled on the bed, but he seems unharmed. If Kakashi were able to move, he'd probably slump with relief.

The man drags Kakashi over to an overstuffed chair in the corner and drops him into it, making sure that Kakashi's paralyzed body doesn't slide off the chair and onto the floor. He then walks over to the bed and tugs the comforter down, revealing Naruto's peaceful face. The boy's drooling a little, cuddling one of the pillows, and Kakashi hasn't seen a sight *this* beautiful in a long, long time.

"He's fine," the man says quietly, ruffling the boy's hair gently. "I'll keep him safe, Kakashi."

"How do you know my name?" Kakashi finally manages to croak. "Who *are* you--"

The man looks up, startled, as if he just accidentally let something slip. His expression darkens, becomes brooding, and he gazes out the open window.

"He's not safe with you," Kakashi says, slightly breathless with the effort of speaking. "He belongs in the Leaf Village, and you took a child from his *home*--"

"I saved him," the man replies, frowning again. "And that place isn't his *home*. No one even *cared* about Naruto outside of him being the nine-tails' vessel."

Fuck.

Kakashi seethes, rages, struggling to move a finger, his foot, *something*, but his own body is nothing more than a *prison*. He feels a rising squall of helplessness, of resignation, because he's entirely at the man's mercy. There's nothing he can do.

"What are you going to do now?" Kakashi asks, his voice low and his gaze wary. The man shakes his head slowly, walking back over to where Kakashi's slouched in the armchair.

“Nothing,” the man says simply. “I just wanted to show you that you don’t have to worry. I’ll keep Naruto safe, Kakashi. Go back to Konoha.”

The man grabs Kakashi by the chin, angling his head up so that Kakashi’s staring right into the stranger’s Sharingan. Kakashi bites his tongue *hard*, struggling to look away, but he can’t move his head or even blink, and the man looks right into his eyes.

“Sleep,” the man murmurs, and Kakashi’s vision plunges into darkness as fatigue suddenly overtakes him.

Close to Fire Country’s border with the Land of Earth, the gently rolling hills and sun-drenched meadows give way to scattered evergreen forests and rocky foothills, the towering mountains of the Stone Range looming far in the background. The sweltering days are replaced by temperate days and chilly nights, the occasional frigid gusts cascading down the faraway slopes to wash over the little log-cabin villages huddled under the pine trees.

Kakashi trudges through the outskirts of one of these villages now, a permanent scowl etched on his face and a grimace twisting his lips under his mask. It’s been *five days* since the stranger forcibly put him to sleep in the trading town, and his head *still* fucking hurts. Every heartbeat triggers a pang of pain, relentlessly, until Kakashi eventually caves and takes field painkillers that do absolutely nothing to make it hurt less.

The stranger had a full day’s headstart on Kakashi, but had done absolutely nothing to mask his trail. Kakashi was traveling alone, without a child, and the stranger wasn’t fucking *flying* anymore, so he’d been able to narrow the gap between himself and the man until he could feel Naruto’s smoky, wild chakra signature just outside this little hamlet.

He can’t feel the man’s presence, but Kakashi had learned the hard way that the stranger is almost *certainly* lurking around the boy.

A lazy stream winds through the very center of the village before flowing northwest, and Kakashi walks alongside it. His footsteps are light and quick, silently gliding over the browning pine needles and dark grey gravel that blanket the bank of the stream. The trees grow tall and dense all around him, a thickening forest, and the sound of freezing wind blowing through the foliage fills Kakashi’s ears and

masks his approach.

There's a bend in the stream up ahead, a sharp turn where the current disappears from view behind solid tree trunks. Kakashi scents the air as he ducks behind one of the massive trunks, rough bark cool under his fingertips. He can smell Naruto, and a second scent that seems... vaguely familiar. It takes him a moment to place it, because it's so bizarrely unexpected.

For the first time, he can smell the stranger, and the man smells like *Itachi Uchiha*. What the fuck?

And then he hears the man's voice, barely audible over the rush of wind and the burble of water--

"Universal Pull."

Kakashi can't help but cry out in complete surprise as an invisible force picks him up and sends him *flying* through the air, upside down, his flailing limbs smacking against thin branches and scraping against bark. He hits the ground with a *thump* that drives the breath from his lungs, but the invisible force keeps dragging him forward, through rotting leaves and dried pine needles that stab at his exposed skin.

When Kakashi finally comes to a rest, in the middle of a clearing, he's dazed and battered, struggling to scramble to his feet.

The stranger sits atop a rock, legs dangling off the side of a boulder, watching Naruto hurl little stones into the water. As Kakashi gets to his feet, the man and Naruto both look over at him; there's genuine astonishment on the boy's face, and slight exasperation in the stranger's eyes as he pulls a ratty eyepatch back over his purple eye.

"Who is that, Juugo?" Naruto asks, climbing up the streambank to gawk openly at Kakashi's disheveled appearance. The stranger sighs wearily, shaking his head at the boy.

"I told you, my real name is *Sasuke*. Not Juugo, not purple-eye-man, not--" the man pauses for a moment, taking in a deep breath and pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "And this is someone who *shouldn't be here*."

"Sorry, *Sasuke*," Naruto says, pronouncing the name with such exaggerated care that it sounds nothing like how the man said it. The stranger--Sasuke--doesn't say anything, but rather, swings himself down from his perch and walks forward slowly. Kakashi holds out one

hand, palm facing the sky, tasting metal as a nascent Chidori crackles between his fingertips.

The man reaches up and yanks his eyepatch down, a bright violet flash blinding Kakashi for a second--

And the chakra is drained from Kakashi's body, the lightning dissipating and his muscles trembling with sudden exhaustion. He lands on all fours, fragments of pine cones and needles stabbing into the flesh of his palms.

"Fuck," the man says, crouching in front of him. "*Fuck*--sorry, I didn't realize you were that worn out already."

A warm hand presses itself against Kakashi's cheek, and a hot tingle blazes through his face and over his body as vigor and vitality returns to his aching muscles. Kakashi gasps at the strange sensation, frantically scooting away from the man. The man doesn't follow him, letting Kakashi have his space.

"What are you doing here?" the man asks. Kakashi's still shaken from the hot surge of energy ricocheting through his arms and chest, and he can't quite form words.

"Is he coming with us?" Naruto says, edging a little closer until he's peeking out from behind the stranger's legs. The stranger looks between Naruto and Kakashi, then shakes his head.

"No. He can't come with us," he says, crouching down and tapping the boy on the nose. "Go wash up while I talk to him. You have dirt on your face."

Naruto giggles and runs off in the direction of the stream, not even sparing a look backwards. The man watches him go, and something that almost seems like a smile plays over his lips. Then he turns back to face Kakashi, and the almost-smile vanishes altogether. Kakashi tenses subconsciously.

But the man just walks over slowly, both hands raised in a placating gesture, and crouches in front of him. Kakashi pulls out a kunai from his weapon pouch, his knuckles turning white from how hard he's holding it. A tremor runs through him, his body still exhausted by the man's strange draining jutsu.

"I won't hurt Naruto," the stranger says to him, speaking slowly and softly. "He's safer with me. I can protect him from the people coming

after him.”

“The only one coming after him is *you*,” Kakashi says, hating how feeble his voice sounds. The man stares at him for a moment, and then snorts with amusement as he stands.

“You don’t understand what you’re talking about,” he says to Kakashi. “I’m only going to say it once more, Kakashi. When you wake up, go back to the Leaf Village. Once it’s safer, I’ll bring Naruto back there. Okay?”

“When I wake up--” Kakashi begins to ask, but there’s a flash of red-and-black, and the inky blackness claims him once again.

For once in his life, Sasuke is at a complete loss. No matter how many times he overpowers Kakashi, no matter how many times he puts Kakashi under a genjutsu, no matter how many times he shows Kakashi that Naruto’s *fine*--

The other man keeps *following* them.

It’s been *six days* since their last confrontation in the pine forest, and Sasuke can pick up Kakashi’s chakra signature trailing them about a mile away. It’s absolutely *fucking* ridiculous. Sasuke grits his teeth and lets out an angry breath, and Naruto looks up, curious.

“It’s nothing,” Sasuke reassures him.

He doesn’t know what he’s going to do. He’s certainly not going to *hurt* the man, not after everything he put Kakashi through when he was an angry teenager. But Sasuke can’t exactly let the current state of affairs stand; Kakashi is more than capable of tracking Naruto across the entirety of the continent, to the point where Sasuke doesn’t see much point in trying to conceal their tracks. And if Kakashi’s following Sasuke when they run into the Akatsuki, there’s a good chance the other man will die.

It’s a fucking mess.

“Naruto,” Sasuke says, coming to a stop and looking around. They’re on a narrow, rocky path that winds its way up the sloping face of a craggy mountain, a faint wind tugging at their cloaks.

“Yea?” Naruto says, his cheeks flushed from the exertion of their

uphill trek. Sasuke can't help reaching out with one hand, letting his fingertips trail through golden locks of hair.

"Can we wait here for a little while?" Sasuke says. Naruto nods eagerly, scurrying a little closer.

"Okay, but can you let me look at your onion eye while we wait? *Please?*" the boy begs, and Sasuke groans.

"It's not a fucking *onion*--you know what, nevermind," Sasuke mutters, joining Naruto on the ground and tugging off his eyepatch. The boy crawls into his lap with a characteristic disregard for personal space or boundaries, a tiny hand grabbing Sasuke's shirt collar as Naruto uses it to pull himself up so he's staring right into Sasuke's Rinnegan. And he just... *stares* at it, completely mesmerized by the tomoe swirling around.

Sasuke doesn't remember Naruto being so fucking *weird*.

Actually, yes he does. This tracks.

It takes a good twenty minutes for Kakashi's presence to finally reach the rocky path. Naruto had grown bored of staring at Sasuke's Rinnegan some time ago, electing instead to burrow into Sasuke's cloak and talk his ear off about how much he liked the food at the inn they'd stayed at two nights ago.

Sasuke's a little distracted by the way Naruto's eyes drill right into him, hyper-fixated and adoring, so he doesn't actually realize Kakashi's here until the man stumbles into direct view. That's when Sasuke looks up, surprised, and curses under his breath.

Naruto repeats the word with glee, and Sasuke curses again, because he hadn't meant to use that kind of language around a kid, and fuck, the curses keep flying out his mouth, shit, *he just did it again*, he really ought to just shut the *fuck* up--

Kakashi pulls out a small metal blade with shaking arms, swaying to and fro. Sasuke frowns, gently pushing Naruto out of his lap and moving closer to get a better look. Kakashi's skin is *pale*, much paler than usual, and beads of sweat dot his forehead. Sasuke can only see one of his grey eyes under the mop of tangled, dyed-black hair, but the eye he *can* see is unfocused and glassy.

“The fuck did you do to yourself?” Sasuke demands, stalking closer and dashing the knife out of Kakashi’s hands as he grabs the man’s shirt. The other man stiffens, struggling slightly, and Sasuke makes the mistake of letting go. For a moment, Kakashi stands on his own, teetering slightly--

And then he keels over and lands flat on his back in the dirt.

Shit.

“Juug--*Sasuke!*” Naruto yells, catching his mistake. “Your friend fell asleep!”

Sasuke tears off his cloak, wadding it into a ball and sliding it under Kakashi’s head. Kakashi’s skin is burning-hot to the touch, damp with sweat and flushed blotchy red in places.

“He’s not asleep, he’s sick,” Sasuke says, rubbing his forehead with one hand. “Great. That’s just great.”

“Are you mad at him?” Naruto asks, and Sasuke winces.

“No, I’m not mad at him. It’s not his fault,” he explains, hesitating. He breathes out slowly, reaching out and wiping the sweat from Kakashi’s brow with his sleeve. “It’s just...everything’s going wrong, and it’s a bit of a mess.”

Naruto comes around to Kakashi’s other side, plopping himself down on the ground and looking closely at Kakashi’s face. Then he looks up and stares at Sasuke with frightening intensity and focus, before looking down at Kakashi again.

“What?” Sasuke asks, slightly unnerved.

“You two look the same. Is he your brother?” Naruto asks, completely nonchalantly. Sasuke chokes on his own spit, doubling over as his shoulders shake with coughs and his face turns red.

“Don’t ever say that to me again,” he manages to sputter out as the coughing subsides. Sasuke glances down at Kakashi, and the black-dyed hair and pale complexion does kind of--

No. No. Sasuke looks away and forces himself to focus.

He can’t fucking *leave* Kakashi in the wilderness, not when he’s unable to so much as move. Which means he has to take Kakashi *with* him.

And as soon as Kakashi gets better, he's going to start trying to escape with Naruto every moment of every day, because that's the kind of stubborn little shit that Kakashi is.

Sasuke groans out loud, standing up and pacing back and forth like a caged beast. This is just fucking *fantastic*. They're in the middle of the wilderness, less than fifteen miles from the eastern border of Earth Country. There are no settlements out here, let alone a hospital, and he can't exactly carry Kakashi through the cold. He needs a place where he can keep Kakashi while the man gets better, without having to worry about anyone finding them, or about Kakashi trying to escape.

And then Sasuke stops walking, eyes wide with realization, because there is a place like this.

The air smells like burning flesh and smoke, courtesy of the Amaterasu Sasuke had summoned to wipe out the legion of Zetsu. Neither Sasuke nor Naruto are particularly bothered by the stench; they've both gotten used to far worse in their years-long struggle against Kaguya.

But there's something strange hovering in the air above the battlefield, something strange that Sasuke had inadvertently created with his Rinnegan.

"What the fuck is that?" Naruto asks, sticking out a hand to touch it. His fingers warp and distort as they drift closer to the anomaly, and he snatches them back. "Did you make that?"

"I did," Sasuke says, speaking with certainty. "It's from my Rinnegan, I can feel it."

"What is it? Some new kind of jutsu?" Naruto asks. Once again, Sasuke speaks with utter certainty, even though he doesn't know where this knowledge is coming from.

"It's--it's a pocket dimension. A gateway to another world," Sasuke says, and he's never been more sure of anything in his life. Naruto studies the swirling distortion with renewed interest.

"We could leave," Sasuke says suddenly, grabbing Naruto's shoulder and turning him around so that they're facing each other. "We could leave all of this behind, Naruto, and live out our lives in another world--"

"Sasuke," Naruto says, shaking his head. "There's still survivors we can save here. We can't just run away."

“We could,” Sasuke says, looking away from Naruto, into the dimming light of the setting sun. “We could run away before one of us loses the other.”

“You’re never gonna lose me, you bastard,” Naruto replies with a faint smile. “It’s you and me, forever.”

Sasuke’s pocket dimension.

Sasuke tries to recreate the strange, out-of-body sensation he’d felt, all those years ago. The air begins to shimmer in front of them, strange distortions eddying and flowing and spinning faster and faster. A black-purple smoke begins to coalesce around the disturbance, and with a thrumming noise, a six-foot wide *hole* blinks into existence, sending out a gust of wind that musses up Naruto and Sasuke’s hair.

“What is *that*?” Naruto asks, with the wide-eyed curious wonder unique to obnoxious six-year-olds. Sasuke kneels next to Kakashi’s body, sliding an arm under him.

“It’s like a door to a special place,” he explains. “It’s a place we can stay until my... uh, *friend* gets better.”

“That doesn’t look like a door,” Naruto says doubtfully, and Sasuke closes his eyes.

Somewhere up above, the versions of Naruto and Kakashi that Sasuke knew are laughing their asses off at him. He *knows* they are.

“C’mon,” Sasuke grumbles, looking over at Naruto as he slings Kakashi’s limp arm over his own shoulders and lifts the other man up. “Step into the glowy purple hole.”

Chapter End Notes

come yell at me about naruto on twitter!

twitter: [@baja_heaux](#)

I posted this without sending it to my beta so, uh, excuse any fuck-ups

Martyrs and Morons

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Strange golden-green grass crunches under Sasuke's feet as warm, humid air blows over him, and the sudden glare of light is almost blinding after the overcast gray of the mountainside they had just come from. He lets the portal fade away behind him, until it collapses on itself and blows away in a cloud of dark smoke.

"Where's the sun?" Naruto asks, blue eyes blown wide with wonder. Sasuke grunts, carefully laying Kakashi down in the grass. He looks around, eyes adjusting to the brightness. There's no sun in the sky; just a muted yellow-orange glow that seems to come from the entirety of the sky.

"There's no sun here," Sasuke says, glancing around. They're in the midst of a vast plain, extending as far as the eye can see. Clusters of weird, spike-leaved trees grow here and there, their foliage glowing a faint shade of scarlet and bearing tiny black fruit. He can see a stream flowing away in a straight line, glimmering like a band of beaten metal in the directionless light coming from the above. And everything else is just...

Endless, monotonous, unchanging calf-length grass. Stretching out till the horizon.

"Is he hurt?" Naruto asks, shuffling closer to Kakashi's body and staring. Sasuke kneels on the ground.

"He'll be okay. Do you want to explore while I fix him up?" Sasuke says, a gentle smile on his face as he watches Naruto nod with vigorous enthusiasm. Said smile slips right off Sasuke's face, however, as he remembers how much trouble Naruto was capable of getting into as a kid, and he quickly summons a shadow clone. Naruto looks between the clone and the real Sasuke with absolute fascination.

"Don't go too far, and stay near the clone," he says, quite sure that the boy is too amazed by the appearance of the clone to pay attention to what he's saying. "Okay?"

"Hm? What?" Naruto asks, completely distracted as he pokes the clone experimentally. Sasuke sighs.

“Nothing. Just go have fun,” he says. Naruto grabs the clone’s sleeve and begins *dragging* it away, and Sasuke activates his Sharingan as he looks down at Kakashi’s body.

He’s not much of a medic, but he’d had to pick up a couple tricks over the years since he didn’t have the nine-tails sealed inside him to heal all his injuries like Naruto did. Medical ninjutsu takes precision control and attention to detail that honestly makes Sasuke’s head ache if he keeps at it too long, but the Sharingan *does* help somewhat.

The first thing he sees when he looks down makes him want to punch Kakashi in the face. It’s been a while since he’s seen someone *this* close to total chakra exhaustion; Sasuke doesn’t even *know* how Kakashi managed to keep pace with them without keeling over dead.

He’s also burning up, to the point where Sasuke can feel the heat radiating off what little exposed, flushed skin he can see. Sasuke frowns, leaning a little closer. It takes a moment to spot the foreign organisms, the innumerable, minuscule specks of life clustered in Kakashi’s lungs and down the back of his throat. It’s an infection of some kind, probably taking advantage of Kakashi’s advanced stage of exhaustion and causing the fever.

“You’re a fucking dumbass,” he says under his breath, tugging down the collar of Kakashi’s dirty shirt and pressing two fingers against the man’s hot, sweaty skin, just under the collarbone. Sasuke winces internally, because while properly trained medic-nin could dull the sensation of pain while working, he had never figured that out himself.

“This might hurt a bit,” he mutters, speaking from experience.

He starts by trickling energy into Kakashi’s drained form, chakra pathways darkened with depletion slowly lightning back up throughout the man’s body. It doesn’t take long for him to transfuse some of his own chakra into Kakashi, warding off the worst effects of the chakra exhaustion.

Then he turns to Kakashi’s physical injuries. His muscles are riddled with microtears, battered and damaged from repetitive strain with no rest. Sasuke accelerates Kakashi’s own healing process, feeding it with a trickle of energy until he’s *reasonably* sure that Kakashi’s legs won’t give out under him again.

Sasuke grunts as he shifts slightly, settling into a more comfortable position as he moves on to the last step. Ever so carefully, he begins to

burn away at the countless organisms infesting Kakashi's respiratory tract. He watches tendrils of fiery chakra slip down Kakashi's throat and thread through his lungs, his hands trembling slightly with the effort of maintaining a steady flow.

It's a balancing game; too little chakra, and this will have no effect. Too *much* chakra, however, will char Kakashi's throat and damage his lungs. Sasuke's focus is so intense that his surroundings fall away, until there's just the fevered thrum of Kakashi's heartbeat under his fingertips and the wet rattle of his labored breaths.

Ten minutes later, Sasuke slumps back with a sigh, wiping sweat off his forehead and rubbing his aching eyes. He glances at the part of Kakashi's face not covered by his mask, relieved to see some color returning to the man's cheeks.

That's when Naruto charges back into sight, and Sasuke jumps up and grabs him before he accidentally tramples Kakashi's prone body laying in the grass. Naruto looks worried, frowning a little as he looks up at Sasuke with his big blue eyes.

"I couldn't find any bugs by the water," he says, his cheeks puffing out in a pout. Sasuke blinks at him, bewildered.

"Why were you looking for bugs?" he asks, already knowing he's going to hate the answer. "And where's the clone I sent with you?"

"Looking for bugs," Naruto says, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. "I came to get you so you can help look too."

"Why do we need bugs?" Sasuke says, still completely lost. Naruto's eyes widen. He looks away quickly, but not before Sasuke can see the guilty expression plastered on his little face.

"Just 'cause," Naruto says, squirming out of Sasuke's arms.

"Naruto," Sasuke says sternly. "Why are you looking for bugs?"

Naruto mumbles something inaudible under his breath, looking straight down at the ground, and Sasuke crosses his arms and repeats himself slowly. Naruto sticks a hand into the pocket of his pants, and gently pulls something out. He cradles it in both hands, and Sasuke leans closer and looks down.

There's a tiny frog nestled in Naruto's cupped hands.

Sasuke groans.

“Where did you even *find* it?” he grumbles. “There aren’t any animals in this dimension!”

“I brought him with me. In my pocket,” Naruto says, his brow furrowed. “Can I keep him? *Please?*”

Staring at Naruto’s pleading expression, all big watery eyes and a trembling lower lip, Sasuke realizes that this is his life now.

“Keep--what are we going to feed it? It can’t eat *rations*--” Sasuke sputters, and Naruto gives him a strange look.

“That’s why I’m looking for bugs?” he says, as if he were explaining something to someone very stupid. Sasuke rubs his forehead with one, casting a weary glance at Kakashi. The unconscious ninja looks *fine* to him; he probably just needs a little rest, and he’ll be okay. In any case, Sasuke supposes he has a couple hours to kill. He glares at the stupid frog, croaking merrily from between Naruto’s fingers, but there’s no heat in his glower.

“...do you want to go get bugs?” he asks, with some reluctance, and Naruto nods firmly. Sasuke extends a hand, flexing his palm as the air swirls and twists into another humming purple-black portal.

“Fine. Let’s go,” he says. Naruto gives him an absolutely *blinding* grin, full of gratitude and happiness and brightness, and Sasuke pretends it doesn’t make his heart skip a beat.

It doesn’t work.

The portals take a little work. It’s easy enough to use Kakashi’s sleepy chakra signature as a reference point for one end, but Sasuke quickly realizes that it’s a *lot* harder to place the other end of the portal. It hadn’t really mattered the one or two times he and the older Naruto had gone between the dimensions for a quick escape from Kaguya’s armies; they’d wanted to come out somewhere entirely different anyway.

But Sasuke had *meant* for this portal to lead to the craggy mountainside they’d just been on, and instead, him and little Naruto are crouching in a damn swamp, staring at a miserable little marsh-village built on raised platforms amongst the mangroves.

“Bugs!” Naruto says, getting distracted yet again. Sasuke turns to watch Naruto lunge for a fat, shiny black fly, losing his balance and almost face-planting into a puddle until Sasuke grabs him by the back of his shirt collar and pulls him upright.

“I’ll get you some bugs! Relax!” Sasuke hisses, turning back to observe the village. “I think we need to buy some supplies from town first, though.”

“Okay,” Naruto says, leaning his head against Sasuke’s shoulder. A thought occurs to the boy, and he pulls at Sasuke’s cloak. “You said I can keep the frog, right?”

“I suppose,” Sasuke says, resigned. “Does it at least have a name?”

“He’s Sasuke!” Naruto replies instantly. “Because he’s my friend.”

“That’s my name, I’m not sharing it with a *frog*--” Sasuke starts to say, exasperated, fully aware that Naruto is going to stubbornly *insist* on the name. But then he pauses, reaching into his pocket.

The leather bag he’d filled with pilfered money *isn’t there*. Sasuke wants to bash his head into the nearest mangrove trunk, but settles for just groaning and looking up at the sky.

“Sasuke?” Naruto asks, his slightly-squeaky, adorable voice filled with concern. “I can name it something else if you don’t wanna share--”

“No, it’s not that,” Sasuke says. “I think I lost our money.”

“How are we gonna buy things then?” Naruto asks.

“We’re just going to take what we need without asking,” Sasuke explains.

“Is that allowed?” Naruto asks, frowning slightly. “Jiji told me that you have to always ask before you take things. Otherwise it’s stealing and that’s *bad*.”

“Do you ask for permission before you breathe in air?” Sasuke says, raising an eyebrow. “Of course not. You just do it, because you need it.”

“So it’s okay to take something without asking if you need it?” Naruto asks, lost in thought. Sasuke shrugs.

“We can’t go camping without tents and camping supplies. Don’t you

want to go camping?”

Naruto’s face clears up, as if Sasuke’s explanation made perfect sense.

“Oh okay,” the boy says happily, leaning back against Sasuke’s shoulder again. “As long as we’re not *stealing*.”

“I would *never* steal,” Sasuke replies haughtily, straightening his stolen cloak and wrapping it firmly around his stolen shirt. “Let’s go get what we need, and then I’ll catch some flies for you.”

Kakashi wakes up in the dark with a gasping, rattling breath, dull pain throbbing through the expanse of his body. It feels like he’s swallowed *fire*, every breath a sharp, agonized pang over his raw throat. He clenches his fists and stares at the ground, trying to acclimate to the discomfort, dull fingernails digging into the flesh of his palms.

He does a quick evaluation of his own injuries. The chill of chakra exhaustion that had weighed down his limbs is gone; now his body hums with a strange, crackling energy that sends jolts of pleasant heat skittering under his skin. After a minute or two, the searing pain in his chest every time he draws breath fades to a more manageable level.

Once he can bear breathing properly again, Kakashi sits up gingerly, glancing around.

He’s shirtless, laying on a thin bedroll, a coarse blanket pooling in his lap. With the exception of his mask, his grime-stained traveling garments are nowhere to be seen; he’s wearing a gray pair of cotton pants, and there’s a shirt on the grass next to him, folded neatly.

Then Kakashi sees the sky, and his eyes widen.

There are no stars, no clouds, no moon or sun; a faint, directionless glow emanates from the vast breadth of the sky, giving off just enough light for Kakashi to be able to see his surroundings.

His breath catches.

The last thing Kakashi remembers is staggering up a mountainside path, tripping over rocks as a mixture of sickness and physical exhaustion wreaked havoc on his body. But he doesn’t have a fever anymore, and the strange energy pulsing through his body makes him feel like he could run a thousand miles without stopping. And the

mountains--

They're *gone*. All Kakashi can see is the massive expanse of a gold and green grassland, a vast plane broken by clusters of luminous trees and crisscrossed with meandering streams. He's never even *heard* of any place like this; it's mesmerizing, dream-like--

And then Kakashi spots the orange glow of a fire, perhaps two hundred feet away, right by the edge of the nearest stream.

His wonder is snuffed out in a heartbeat, replaced by the ruthless pragmatism of a trained ANBU captain. Kakashi flips onto his stomach, sliding through knee-height grass like a snake as he cranes his neck for a better view.

A dim campfire smolders, little streamers of silver-gray smoke rising into the air, surrounded by shadowed lumps. Kakashi opens his Sharingan, trying to get a better look, and then immediately hisses in pain as a stabbing headache shoots through his skull, radiating from behind his eye.

Shit. No chakra, then--he'll have to do this the old-fashioned way.

It takes a while to slither through the grass, moving stealthily towards the mysterious encampment. By the time he's close enough to get a better look, his bare torso and arms are smeared green and brown from grass stains and mud.

The embers of the campfire light up the surrounding area surprisingly well, and Kakashi can see the slumped forms around the flames are actually several traveling packs; bags overflowing with rations, blankets, weapons, and all manner of random things. And on the other side of the packs, Kakashi sees a flash of golden hair.

He breathes in sharply, ignoring the dull ache in his lungs, because if Naruto's here, then the stranger must be too--

Kakashi spots the second bedroll, a little distance from the campfire. The stranger's sprawled out on his stomach, fast asleep, unaware and unsuspecting.

And Kakashi *moves*.

He springs up from the grass, dry grass rustling underfoot as he darts forward. Kakashi shoves a hand into one of the open traveling packs, pulling out a kunai, before turning on his heel to sprint right at the

stranger's bedroll.

He lands on the stranger's back with a solid thud, pinning the man down with his legs and yanking one of his arms behind his back. Pressing the blade of the kunai against the nape of the stranger's neck, Kakashi watches in grim satisfaction as the man wakes up suddenly, with a strangled cry.

Beautiful stars fall slowly from the sky, twinkling and glimmering with rainbow-hued light as they land all around Sasuke, a divine precipitation. The field he's standing in blazes with orange and yellow wildflowers, and the chittering choruses of songbirds is almost deafening--

And Sasuke wakes up, gasping and panting, feeling something fucking *crushing* the air right out of his lungs. A blade, cool and sharp jabs, into the base of his skull. There's a heavy weight pressing down on his legs, and one of his arms is twisted behind his back at an excruciating angle.

Kakashi seems to have woken earlier than Sasuke expected.

"Fucking *hell*, Kakashi," he sputters, as the other man shoves his head down *hard*. "That shit hurts--*fuck!*"

Sasuke resists the urge to send Kakashi *flying* through the air, wincing as he lets the other man restrain him roughly; the conversation will probably go smoother if Kakashi thinks *he's* in control. So Sasuke swallows his pride, doing his best not to snort with amusement as Kakashi wrenches his arm further behind his back.

But when Kakashi presses the kunai against his neck hard enough for the blade to draw a trickle of blood, Sasuke rolls his eyes. He turns his head to the side so his mouth isn't pressed into the bedroll under him.

"If you kill me, you won't be able to leave this place," he grumbles, doing his best to glare over his shoulder.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kakashi demands, still straddling Sasuke's body and pinning him down.

"Aren't you part dog? Does anything about this place smell familiar to you?" Sasuke shoots back. He hears Kakashi snuffle, and his lips twitch with a smile at the ridiculous noise.

“Where are we?” Kakashi asks, sounding noticeably less sure of himself. Sasuke squirms a little, doing his best to look back at the other man.

“We’re in a pocket dimension. Only I can open the portals that let us enter and leave this place,” he says. Kakashi’s grip on his wrist tightens to a bruising intensity, and Sasuke fights back a grimace.

“You’re lying,” Kakashi says. His voice is a lethal, furious whisper as he presses down with all of his weight, and Sasuke lets out a pained breath from between grit teeth.

“You’re welcome to try to open a portal yourself,” Sasuke mutters. “Be my guest.”

For a long moment, Kakashi doesn’t move, keeping Sasuke restrained as he seems to think something over. Then he wrenches Sasuke’s arm back again, leaning forward to snarl right into Sasuke’s ear.

“Open a portal, then. Right now.”

“I could. But don’t you have any questions for me first?” Sasuke asks, raising an eyebrow, fully committing to the damsel-in-distress bit. “I’m at your *mercy*, you could get all the answers you want right now.”

“I said, open a portal *right now*,” Kakashi repeats, his voice low and dangerous, and he begins to twist Sasuke’s wrist. Sasuke scrunches his eyes shut, gasping as he feels the bone begin to give--

Fuck. Alright. Sasuke is officially *over* letting Kakashi feel like he’s in control.

The metallic tang of iron fills his mouth as a cracking blue-purple nimbus of lightning dances over his body, and the pressure of Kakashi’s body vanishes as the man goes flying through the air. Sasuke catches him, ensnaring him in a cocoon of swirling air so he doesn’t go too far, before dumping him on the ground from the height of ten feet.

Kakashi lands on the ground with a grunt, twitching and unable to move his limbs. Sasuke gets up slowly, wincing as he massages his strained shoulder. A flicker of green light runs down his arm, hastily repairing most of the damage, and he lets out a relieved breath. And then Sasuke fixes Kakashi with an exasperated glare.

“You’re such a *dick*--why are you covered in dirt?” he asks, realizing

that Kakashi's bare chest is absolutely *plastered* with mud and grass stains. Kakashi doesn't reply, stubbornly keeping his mouth shut as he tries to bring his spasming muscles under control. Sasuke spares a second to cast a look over at Naruto--the boy is sleeping through the racket, completely unbothered--before sighing and walking over to Kakashi, sitting down in the grass next to him.

"Are you hurt?" Sasuke asks him gently. Kakashi looks over, narrowing his grey eyes with suspicion, and remains silent. Sasuke scowls.

"It's not a trick question, dumbass," he snaps, running a hand through his hair. "I don't want you to fucking *pass out* again."

Kakashi shakes his head, leaning away from him. Sasuke doesn't know *why* Kakashi's acting like this; the Kakashi he'd known had been utterly unflappable, always confident, never faltering. But *this* Kakashi is a completely different person. This Kakashi is so much younger, and Sasuke thinks about what he must be thinking. Kakashi's been captured, and he probably thinks Sasuke is going to *hurt* him or something, use him as a hostage or interrogate him or *gods* know what else--

Sasuke sighs again.

"Alright. Listen," he says, crossing his legs and sitting up. "I don't--I'm not your enemy. Okay? I'm not gonna hurt you or anything."

Kakashi stares at the ground with a blank expression, having regained enough control over his body to sit up straight.

"Naruto wasn't safe in Konoha anymore, Kakashi. You fought Orochimaru, didn't you? He would have taken Naruto if I hadn't stopped him," Sasuke says, trying to make him *understand*. Kakashi finally looks up at him.

"You defeated Orochimaru. So why take Naruto away after that?" Kakashi asks

"Because Orochimaru survived," Sasuke says, weighing his next words carefully to make sure Kakashi *believes* him. "And he's not the only one who's hunting Naruto. There's an organization hunting jinchuuriki, and they won't stop coming after him until he's dead."

"An organization hunting jinchuuriki," Kakashi repeats, his voice dripping with skepticism. Sasuke nods.

“Yes. That’s the truth, I swear,” Sasuke says.

“And how is taking the boy outside Konoha’s defenses making him *safer*?” Kakashi asks

“Pocket dimension, remember?” Sasuke says, gesturing at the landscape around them with one hand. “Only I can let people in and out. And it’s not just for his safety, it’s to stop people in the village getting hurt everytime someone comes after him.”

“That’s not your call to make,” Kakashi mutters, looking away. Sasuke frowns at that.

“Kakashi, he *wanted* to come with me. He was fucking miserable in the village, and he wasn’t safe either. If you really cared about the kid, you’d see this was the *right call*,” Sasuke says sharply, standing up and dusting himself off. He offers Kakashi a hand, to pull him up too, but Kakashi looks at the extended hand as if it’s a particularly disgusting insect.

“I don’t believe a *single* word that comes out of your mouth,” he says.

Sasuke stares at him for a long moment, before letting out a defeated breath and nodding.

“Fine, that’s fair,” he says. “But can we wash you off, and then check to see if you’re healed?”

Kakashi pulls his knees up to his chest, shaking his head, and Sasuke grits his teeth.

“Okay. Whatever,” he grumbles. “Forget I asked. Is there *anything* I can do to make you less of a stubborn *ass*?”

“You could let me and Naruto go,” Kakashi replies with a casual shrug. “Rather than keeping us prisoner.”

“I’m not keeping him *prisoner*--you know what?” Sasuke snaps, crouching in front of Kakashi and leaning in close. “How’s this? You watch the kid while I kill the creeps hunting him, and then you can take him back to Konoha *if* he wants. Once it’s *safe*. If I agree to that, will you listen to me?”

Kakashi blinks a couple times, looking a little startled. Then he regains his composure, glaring right back at Sasuke with a steely glint in his grey eyes.

“There’s no guarantee you’ll keep your word,” he replies, refusing to back down. “I’m not a six-year-old, you can’t manipulate me into obeying you--”

“Unbelievable,” Sasuke says, running a hand over his face as he straightens up and walks away. He grabs a shirt from one of the packs by the fire and *hurls* it at Kakashi’s face before stomping back over to his bedroll. The sunless sky is growing brighter and brighter as daytime approaches, but Sasuke’s still *tired*.

“I’m going back to fuckin’ sleep,” Sasuke says, not bothering to even look over at Kakashi as he lays down. “If you jump on me again, I’m going to dunk you in the river.”

Chapter End Notes

this chapter took fucking forever to write and i don't know why

I also just started writing another time travel fic (a Founder's Era one), so if y'all are into that genre feel free to check it out!

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/36285856/chapters/90457972>

twitter: [@baja_heaux](#)

Unlikely Companions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tenzo mutters a curse as he hobbles to the front door, rubbing his eyes blearily before grabbing the doorknob and whipping it open. Shisui's mouth forms a perfect "o" as he blinks at Tenzo with some surprise, his hand still raised to pound on the door.

"I thought that would take longer," he says. Tenzo narrows his eyes, and Shisui hops back a step, frantically holding up a brown paper bag spotted with grease stains.

"I brought you breakfast, *please don't hurt me*," he says, eyes wide, holding up the bag like a shield. Tenzo leans out the doorway, glancing at the window at the end of the apartment building's hallway. Early afternoon sunlight gushes through the window, vigorous and vibrant.

"I didn't mean to sleep in," Tenzo says with a sigh. "We got back late last night and I just... passed out."

Tenzo grabs Shisui by the wrist and pulls him inside, shutting the door behind them, wincing slightly as he looks around the mess in his apartment. The wooden floors are smeared with grass and dirt, muddy sandal tracks and traveling clothes dumped on the floor. Tenzo hadn't even made it to his own bedroom; instead, he'd collapsed on his couch and *slept*. His kit is scattered around wherever he threw it off himself last night.

"You've really let this place go," Shisui muses, and Tenzo scowls as he snatches the paper bag out of his hands. The pastry is flaky and buttery, still warm, and Tenzo scarfs it down as he hunts for his reconnaissance notebook. He finds it, half-hidden under the couch, and he tosses it at Shisui.

"No fuckin' sign of him. Not even the Inuzuka on the mission with us could pick up Kakashi's trail," Tenzo says, dropping heavily on his couch, licking his fingers absentmindedly as he props up his feet on the table in front of him.

Shisui flips through the book, his brow furrowed a little as he reads. He looks up after a minute, and Tenzo anticipates the question on his

lips.

“We had no luck tracking Naruto either,” Tenzo says, running a hand through his messy hair. “Kakashi might have been able to track the kid, considering how much time he spent watching him, but--”

“But there’s no sign of him,” Shisui finishes, dark eyes warm with sympathy. Tenzo doesn’t trust himself to speak and settles for a tense nod, jaw clenched. Shisui sets the notebook down on the table. He looks like he wants to say something, but thinks better of it and glances away.

“What is it?” Tenzo asks suspiciously. Shisui shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

“Do--would you want to come with me for the rest of the day? You could help me make dinner, maybe?”

“*What?*”

“I--I just mean like, you’ve been out of the village for like two weeks, you probably don’t have anything to eat here, and you seem upset, and you shouldn’t be alone...” Shisui says hurriedly, his voice growing smaller and smaller.

Tenzo stares at him for a long moment. Shisui scratches his neck, laughing awkwardly as his cheeks grow pink.

“Sorry,” Shisui mumbles. “You don’t have to--”

“No, I--uh, I can come over,” Tenzo says, not quite sure *why* he’s agreeing to this. On the list of things Tenzo would want to do on a weekday night, ‘dinner with Shisui’ is down there between ‘eating Kakashi’s cooking’ and ‘licking the floor of the ANBU barracks’.

But it’s a *hell* of a lot better than sitting in his apartment with the blinds drawn, frustrated and worried and terrified that something bad’s going to happen to Kakashi.

“I can come over,” he repeats, a little steadier this time, half-expecting Shisui to rescind the offer. But Shisui beams at him and starts talking about the vegetables they need to pick up on the way home, and Tenzo doesn’t feel quite as *empty* anymore.

It’s weird, but not bad-weird. It’s good-weird. Tenzo watches Shisui turn around without looking and trip over a discarded sandal, nearly

falling flat on his face.

Good-weird.

It's been a long time since Tenzo has felt *this* out of place. The crooked streets of the Uchiha district are awash in resplendent afternoon light, filled with ranks of taciturn Uchiha and gently blowing breezes, not a single outsider in sight.

Except for Tenzo, that is, who's being dragged down the alleyway by a frightfully-energetic Shisui.

"Are you sure it's okay for me to be here?" Tenzo hisses under his breath, glaring at the red-and-white fan on the back of Shisui's shirt to avoid the stares of strangers.

" 'Course it is," Shisui says, in between tossing big smiles and greetings left and right. Tenzo watches him with slight incredulity, because it seems like he personally knows *every single* Uchiha they run into.

The Uchiha always notice Tenzo first; it's still remarkably rare for outsiders to come into the heart of the Uchiha district, and everyone studies Tenzo with surprise and a touch of suspicion.

But then Shisui will yell out an excited greeting, or he'll clap them on the back, or he'll wave like a hyperactive nine-year old, and those wary gazes will melt and turn to genuine affection. Tenzo thinks he's seen more Uchiha smile in the past ten minutes than he's seen in the previous *year*.

"They like you," he says to Shisui, and there must be some unintentional surprise in his voice, because Shisui slows and turns, frowning.

"Uh, *duh*. What's not to like?" he demands.

"Nothing," Tenzo says, clearing his throat. "Didn't we need to buy some things? It's getting late."

"That's where we're going," Shisui says with a lopsided grin. "Here--"

There used to be a time when Shisui was always respectful and reserved towards Tenzo, driven by a sense of intimidation and

unfamiliarity. Tenzo *mourns* the loss of that respect now as Shisui pulls him along like a sack of flour, babbling endlessly about which produce vendors give him the best deals.

Ten minutes later, Tenzo sighs as Shisui hands him a *fifth* bag to hold.

“Did you just ask me to come with you so I could carry everything for you?” Tenzo grumbles, shifting bags from one hand to the other so he doesn’t drop everything onto the ground. Shisui glances over his shoulder at Tenzo, looking a little guilty.

“Shit, I didn’t mean--here, gimme one,” Shisui says, turning around and reaching for the bags. Tenzo, having *just* balanced all five paper bags in his arms, scowls.

“It’s fine,” he says.

“No, seriously, just give me, like, two--” Shisui says.

“It’s *fine*, Shisui--” Tenzo says, trying to get away from Shisui’s grabby-hands.

“Will you quit being so *stubborn*--” Shisui says, exasperated, seizing one of the bags and *yanking*.

“Stop it! You’re gonna make me drop--”

“*Shit!*”

One of the bags tumbles to the cobblestones with a crash of shattering glass, strawberry jam splattering the street, potatoes and onions bouncing all over the street. Tenzo stumbles back, stabilizing himself and tightening his arms around the remaining bags, and sends a *furious* glower at his companion.

Shisui groans, picking up the bag and trying to stuff everything back inside. He goes chasing after a couple onions that roll lazily towards the curb.

“You’re a human disaster,” Tenzo says with a sigh. Shisui’s head snaps up at that.

“That’s *mean*, Tenzo,” he whines. He smiles a little sheepishly. “I’m sorry. This one’s probably my fault.”

“*Probably?*” Tenzo asks, raising an eyebrow. Shisui huffs in mock-anger and shakes his head, setting down the bag on the cobblestones

and getting on all fours to grab a stray potato from under a wooden bench.

“Shisui?” an unfamiliar voice calls out, and Tenzo turns to see a vaguely-familiar man emerge from one of the shops lining the street. “What are you doing?”

Shisui scrambles to his feet, abandoning the potato to its fate as his face turns bright red.

“N-nothing,” he says. “Hi. Hello. Chief, uh, sir.”

“Oh. Um, hello,” the man says awkwardly, and Tenzo finally realizes just who this man *is*. Fugaku Uchiha, normally a bastion of stoic impassivity, looks almost comically uncomfortable. His dark eyes flit between the street, the shopfronts, and even the sky, as if he’s afraid to meet Shisui’s eyes.

“You’re well?” he asks after a moment, and Shisui nods vigorously.

“Yes! Good!” Shisui manages to say, appearing every bit as uncomfortable as Fugaku. Tenzo frowns, confused, because this is the most painful small talk he’s ever seen, and he’s friends with *Kakashi*.

“Is--is Itachi well?” Fugaku asks, looking deliberately at the cobblestones between his feet with intense focus.

Oh, Tenzo realizes, suppressing a wince. Okay, this makes sense now.

“He’s, um, good. Super busy. With his Hokage apprenticeship, and everything,” Shisui says weakly.

“Of course,” Fugaku says, nodding slowly.

“How-how is Sasuke doing?” Shisui asks.

“He’s doing well. He misses his brother,” Fugaku says with a small, tired smile. The smile falls off his face after a second, though, and it’s replaced by an almost-wistful expression. “Can you... would you tell Itachi that we miss him as well? His mother and I.”

“I can--yeah, I mean, of course. Yes. I can do that,” Shisui says, flustered. And then, clearly not thinking about what he’s saying, he continues. “You should come visit sometime!”

Tenzo gawks at Shisui, who turns bright red and immediately starts stammering out something unintelligible. Fugaku just waves a hand,

cutting him off.

“No, no. I don’t want to impose,” he says softly, a distant look in his eyes. “He wouldn’t want that--but, uh, if you could just tell him. That we do miss him.”

“We can pass that along,” Tenzo interjects, before Shisui can say something else stupid. Fugaku nods, then takes a step away.

“I have to head back down to the station. It was nice seeing you,” Fugaku says. He pauses, as if he’s going to add something, but settles for a mumbled “goodbye” as he disappears around the corner.

Tenzo shakes his head, and Shisui frowns.

“What?” he asks, and Tenzo snorts.

“You’re a human *disaster*.”

“Hey!”

“Mom! I’m home!” Shisui yells at the top of his lungs, letting the screen door slam shut in Tenzo’s face. Tenzo mutters several unkind words under his breath.

“Shit! Sorry,” Shisui says, pushing the screen door open and holding it. “Forgot your hands are full.”

“Is that Itachi?” a woman’s voice drifts from somewhere within the house.

“No!” Shisui bellows back, at a volume that Tenzo finds both excessive and unnecessary. “It’s just Tenzo!”

“Can I set these down?” Tenzo asks, and Shisui waves him into the kitchen. Tenzo sets the bags on the counter, rolling his shoulders slightly to work out the kinks in them. He peers around with some curiosity, as if Shisui’s home would have some clues as to why Shisui himself is such a fucking mess.

But the house seems perfectly *normal*, an archetypically cozy cottage lost in the country fields. The walls bear numerous framed photographs of Shisui as a child, the wooden floor is well-worn and scratched up, and a truly *hideous* chicken-shaped clock hangs on the wall next to a rickety screen door that leads out onto the back porch.

Shisui rummages through one of the bags, humming under his breath as he pulls out potatoes and heads over to the sink.

Tenzo keeps exploring, trailing his fingertips over the red-and-white checkered tablecloth on the dining table and sniffing the freshly-cut flowers stuffed into a glass bottle on the countertop. The back door itself is open, and the screen does nothing to hold back the afternoon heat from seeping into the house.

Tenzo walks up to the screen, staring out over the backyard. The expanse of wild grass stretches to the shady treeline a couple hundred feet away, but the grass closer to the house is cropped short. He sees a half dozen garden plots, outlined by raised wooden borders, arranged in a row a couple feet from the porch.

"You garden?" Tenzo asks Shisui, slightly surprised. Shisui looks up from the potatoes he's rinsing under the tap, shaking his head.

"Nah, that's Mom's garden. I'm not allowed near it," he says, and Tenzo snickers.

"Sounds about right," he says. Shisui's face scrunches up in a scowl.

"Shut *up*--"

"Shisui!" an admonishing voice exclaims, and Tenzo looks over his shoulder. The newcomer is a short woman with curly black hair, eerily similar to the messy mop atop Shisui's head. "That's not any way to speak to a guest!"

"He started it," Shisui mumbles under his breath, rubbing his fingernails across the bumpy skin of a potato to dislodge a stubborn bit of dirt.

"You must be Tenzo," the woman says, a warm smile on her face. "Call me Asami! It's nice to finally meet you, I've heard so much from Shisui--"

"*Mom!*"

"It's nice to meet you," Tenzo replies, and he can't help smiling back. "You have such a lovely home. I was just looking at your garden."

"Oh, you're so sweet!" Asami says, a delighted glimmer in her eyes. "It just started as something to pass the time, but I'm quite proud of how it turned out. Do you garden, Tenzo?"

“When I have the time to,” Tenzo says. “It’s very relaxing. I like watching things grow.”

Asami leans over the kitchen counter and pokes Shisui in the chest, glaring at him. Shisui looks up, absolutely wounded.

“What did I do?” he whines, and Asami snorts.

“All these years you’ve been working with him, and you never thought to introduce us?” she demands. “Come, Tenzo, let’s go outside so I can give you a closer look...”

“Wait!” Shisui calls out as Tenzo opens the sliding door and motions for Asami to go first. “Wait! Aren’t you guys gonna help me cook dinner?”

Tenzo smiles *ever-so-sweetly* at Shisui, then slams the door shut.

Itachi knocks on the door, letting out a weary sigh as he leans against the doorframe.

It’s been a long day.

It’s been a long *week*, really. His first week of training to succeed the Third Hokage has been nothing short of pure *hell*, filled with late nights and exhaustion-induced headaches.

It would have been a difficult transition during *normal* times, but with the way things have been going...

Between Orochimaru’s attack, Danzo’s assassin abducting Naruto, and Kakashi Hatake deserting the village, Itachi has had a *lot* to deal with.

His thoughts drift to the reassignment notice in his front pocket. He’d almost missed it; a brief note about a single ANBU being reassigned is easy to miss when there’s a series of crises going on.

The front door flies open, breaking Itachi free from his reverie, and the mouth-watering aroma of something *delicious* washes over him as he takes a deep breath. Shisui blinks at him.

“Hi,” he says. Shisui looks frazzled, upon further inspection, and Itachi wonders what his idiot best friend has managed to do *this* time.

“I think I messed up,” he says, and Itachi groans.

“What did you *do*?” Itachi says. Shisui throws a wary glance over his shoulder before answering.

“I, uh, introduced Tenzo to my mom? And they’re like, *inseparable* now, they won’t stop talking about gardening and imported teas--”

“Shisui,” Itachi interrupts, reaching inside his pocket and feeling the folded edge of the reassignment notice with the tip of his finger. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

“Yes!” Shisui yells, a hint of hysteria creeping into his voice. “I wanted to tell you that I *messed up*, because I introduced Tenzo to my *mom*, and now they’re *inseparable*, and--”

“Shisui!”

“What?”

Shisui scratches his nose, looking so convincingly *clueless* that Itachi wonders if he’s mistaken for a second, and that the notice in his pocket is referring to some other ANBU.

“I work in the Hokage’s office,” Itachi says, unable to keep a wry smirk from spreading over his lips. “They send us a notice when someone is reassigned to the Hokage Guard Platoon.”

Shisui’s eyes grow as wide as saucers, and Itachi can’t help himself. He *laughs*, pulling out the notice and handing it to his friend.

“It was supposed to be a *surprise*,” Shisui says mournfully, skimming the note. “I was gonna climb through your window and say hi...”

“I’m surprised they even let you into the Guard Platoon. Does that count?”

“No! You’re the *worst*--” Shisui says, but he’s cracking up too as he’s saying it, chuckling ruefully. The sound of their laughter mingles with the chirping of little sparrows and songbirds.

And after a minute, Itachi leans against the doorframe, arms crossed. Shisui looks over at him, still grinning, and the sun’s beating down with golden zeal that lights up the other boy’s face. The air outside is hot and humid and still, and Itachi closes his eyes and enjoys the cool breeze drifting out from the open door.

He feels warm. He feels *happy*. He feels like--

Well. This might not be heaven, but Itachi feels like this might be as close as it gets.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter, like my life, was beta'd by outstorm <3

twitter: [@baja_heaux](https://twitter.com/baja_heaux)

End Notes

come yell at me on twitter!!

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